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**The urban enigma  
towards a decolonial geography of postcolonial Latin America (1880-1964)**

Vegliò, Simone

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KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

THESIS TITLE:

**"THE URBAN ENIGMA: TOWARDS A DECOLONIAL GEOGRAPHY OF  
POSTCOLONIAL LATIN AMERICA (1880-1964)"**

CANDIDATE:

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**A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
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*To Tiziana,*

*We miss you every day;  
your voice, your smile, your presence*

## Introduction

### *The Urban Enigma*

This study proposes a reappraisal of Latin America's postcolonial geography by looking at the narratives and discourses which paved the ground, assisted, and analysed the concrete transformations of some of its most prominent urban centres. The project reconsiders the postcolonial period of the continent – namely when the newborn nation-states progressively consolidated their dominion – and draws attention to, by means of its analysis, the specific conformations of power and knowledge which have controversially shaped the geography of Latin America. This investigation identifies urbanisation as the main 'place' where power relations – coming from outside as well as from inside the continent – might be examined in the best way, and where it is possible to highlight such modern configurations and deep cultural hybridisations which define, and have in the past defined, the global space known as 'Latin America'. The main objective of this research is to draw a historical geography which highlights the multiple ways through which Latin America has been produced as a stable and coherent geographical concept. By doing so, the research aims to uncover old hierarchical conformations which, in complex and multifaceted forms, have outlived the end of colonialism.

In order to understand how this set of questions was articulated across the Latin American space, this study diachronically considers the cases of three of the most iconic Latin American capital cities: Buenos Aires (1880-1946), Mexico City (1920-1960), and Brasília (1956-1964). More precisely, in each case the research focuses on the construction and main

features that distinguish the architectural intervention most representative of each country's national project: the 'Argentine Pavilion' in Buenos Aires; the Palace of Public Education in Mexico City; the Palace of National Congress in Brasília.

Cities, from the start of the colonial period and ever since, have been crucial for articulating power relations in Latin America. Representing in their first stage the peripheral bastions of the imperial domains and, at the same time, central locations for the organisation of the colonial space, the post-independence period transformed cities into the core sites through which the *nation state* – therefore each country's social, political and cultural hierarchies – was shaped. Furthermore, Latin America experienced a dramatic increase in urbanisation throughout the twentieth century; in the 1970s this trend began to be recognised as a process of *urban explosion* (Romero 2001 [1976]). Starting in 1880 and concluding in 1964, this research investigates the genealogy of this contradictory process, which I call here the *urban enigma*. On one side, the ruling elites viewed urbanisation as synonymous with modernisation, and used cities as strategic tools to modernise their countries. Yet, at the same time, this visibly clashed with the traditional idea of Latin America as a rural space dominated by the presence of the peasantry and indigenous populations, which in addition constituted the historical basis of the ruling elites' power and wealth. Depending on the case, this problematic urban/rural relationship was differently configured according to the social, economic, and political elements at stake.

The investigation of these episodes of urban transformation, framed in a larger context of socio-political and cultural transformations, will help draw a genealogy of what was defined as the "urban question" starting from the 1970s, that is, the consideration that the urban environment was a central space for the (re)organisation of capitalist relations on a global scale

(Castells 1977). If the urban question presented dystopic effects of capital accumulation and reproduction such as inequality, social exclusion, and uncontrolled growth of cities, therefore making 'the urban' one of the most important global 'questions' from the 1970s, this research looks at the genealogy of the urban question, that I call the *urban enigma*. The urban enigma is therefore a way to define and explore Latin America during the decades before the 1970s when, starting from the processes of solidification of the nation states that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, the urban environment began to be perceived as a space in which the modernisation of the countries was evidently at stake. As a result, the projects of urban transformation, that began to be synonyms of national modernisation at that time, represented *enigmas* whose solution was crucially tied to the success of such national ambitions. As will be shown throughout the thesis, the decades under investigation quickly began to manifest some anticipation of the urban question, such as – among many others – the rapid growth of cities, their overwhelming power over the countryside, and the fast rate of impoverishment of large sectors of the urban population. Thus, the urban enigma is a definition that, genealogically – in relation to the urban question – aims to show how the ruling elites thought and directed the transformation of Latin America's urban space.

If space can be considered a fundamental point to understand the making of social and political processes, it is by looking at its transformations and metamorphoses that a geography able to describe the peculiarities of such power structures becomes possible. For example, taking into account the specific relationships marking the capitalist era, urban space has represented a strategic viewpoint from which the combinations of social, political, economic and, not least, cultural hierarchies have been fruitfully investigated over the last few decades (Lefebvre 1991 [1974], 2003 [1970]; Harvey 1973, 1985, 2001; Castells 1977;

Saunders 1981; Davis 1990, 2006; Merrifield 2002; Brenner and Schmid 2015). However, when we talk about the urban environment, two intertwined questions immediately emerge. First, the problem of clearly defining the urban space, especially when we use concepts such as ‘the city’, that is, spatial configurations that are difficult to conceptualise and, more importantly, where any attempt at conceptualisation is likely to be significantly unsuitable when temporal and spatial coordinates change. In relation to this issue, it would probably be deceptive to conceptualise the city as a sort of ‘object’ that can be equally investigated regardless of its *spatio-historical specificities*<sup>1</sup>. Second, there is the problem of placing the city – or the urban – within a set of relations to the rest of the space. What is the role of an urban settlement in terms of national, regional, and global geographies? If, on the one hand, this seems to be a rather old and banal question, it is nonetheless of crucial importance to examine the multiple factors that contribute to the specific articulation of the city and its consequent transformations.

These two points constitute the recurring elements that will crisscross the whole research. They will be explored both theoretically and in their empirical forms. Hence, starting from this problematisation of the city in terms of its socio-spatial definitions, there are consequent strategies that this research contemplates in order to address these questions. To begin with, in order to avoid a trans-historical conception of the city, it is important to look at each of the cases analysed, as well as at the whole of Latin America’s urbanisation (I will come back to this latter point later), by

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this idea of spatio-historical specificity from Gillian Hart’s relevant contribution on what she methodologically framed as *relational comparison* (Hart 2016). In order to achieve a “non-Eurocentric conception of the world” Hart called for a “a spatio-historical method of Marxist postcolonial analysis” (Hart 2016: 372). This argument will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

considering their spatio-historical specificities, which in particular means taking into account two elements.

On the one hand, in relation to the temporal aspects, the significance of a genealogical work, that is – following Foucault’s approach – the attempt to understand historical segments by investigating the combinations of factors that brought to the fore that specific condition while avoiding the temptation of any linear explanation and focusing, conversely, on what Foucault defined as the “profusion of entangled events” (Foucault 1984: 89). On the other hand, considering the spatial aspects, it is crucial to provide a theoretical discussion about the space under analysis, shedding light on the specific social, political, economic, and cultural elements that contribute to create such geographical definitions, that is to say, what the meaning of *postcolonial Latin America* is. Nonetheless, that they cannot be viewed as separate entities but, on the contrary, they are inevitably intertwined. This indivisibility means that it is not possible to wholly and consistently discuss one aspect without taking into account the other. Spatial and temporal elements are here sometimes treated separately only to present the main theoretical and methodological axes that underpin the development of this research; however, as the discussion throughout the chapters will show, both ‘genealogy’ and ‘postcolonial’ are imbued with aspects simultaneously concerning space and time, aspects that are analytically indivisible.

The term postcolonial has been at the centre of many debates that discussed its actual meaning and the ways it indicated much more than a mere temporal description (for instance, Chambers and Curti 1996; Blunt and Wills 2000; Chakrabarty 2000; Young 2001; Mbembe et al 2006; Mezzadra and Rahola 2006; Roy 2016) but, at the same time, it inevitably delineates a *time* (Hall 1996). Within this research, I explored the period in which most post-independence countries began to consolidate their state structure and, simultaneously, their national identity. In this sense, it is

particularly interesting to investigate this period as, despite the fact that the most Latin American countries achieved their independence in the early nineteenth century, the structures of the nation-state were fully deployed only towards the end of the century. This is due to several reasons, the most important of which is the internal instability that the countries faced in the first decades after independence. These conflicts concerned both competition for power between the elites and the achievement of a full control over the national space (something that triggered, such as in Argentina and Chile, violent wars against the indigenous populations and *caudillos*, the local political leaders).

As a result, this research uses postcolonial as a periodisation (*postcolonial Latin America*, as indicated in the title) in order to focus on central aspects such as the idea of belonging to a national identity (and its making), the racial components that defined the idea of population, the very notion of population in relation to a certain territory, the strong faith in the urban as a modernising tool and the articulation of a certain geopolitical identity in the international scene. All these crucial aspects, fundamental for the formation and strengthening of the nation state, were thought in close relation to European and North American experience.

Therefore, the periodisation I chose for this research particularly represents a period in which the postcolonial – understood as a socio-spatial and cultural action – began to be intensively at work. In some respects, the postcolonial has not ceased to exert its power since that time, in the sense that despite the struggles, resistances, and attempts to overthrow the nation-state structure, we can probably argue that such a socio-spatial and cultural organisation is still ongoing today – although with significant differences. And it is because of these differences that I chose to end this research's period of investigation in the 1960s, that is, just before neoliberal discourses and practices progressively began to exert their doctrines across

the Latin American space and, accordingly, the *postcolonial condition* (Mezzadra and Rahola 2006) presented new features and modalities of action.

Hence, the fact of indicating postcolonial as a periodisation aims precisely to highlight a specific time in which, despite the numerous discrepancies and contradictions within the countries, the making of the nation-state along with its social, cultural, political and economic agenda were particularly strong and radically important for countries that are today seen as coherent actors (in the sense of International Relations) within the global scene. Finally, it is important to note that when it comes to using postcolonial lens we implicitly or explicitly imply a *double move*, that is, the mobilisation “anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles on the one hand” and “the heritage of Western philosophy and of the disciplines that constitute the European humanities on the other” (Mbembe et al 2006: 17). The choice of labelling a periodisation as well as an intellectual approach as postcolonial means looking at our research topics and themes while taking into consideration the complex and often contradictory combination of these elements.

### ***Research Design and Structure***

The research is designed around a multi-scalar view that starts from each city’s project of urban transformation. This will be discussed through the history of specific buildings (discussion about how they were selected is in Chapter 3) developing a wider discussion about their articulation within broader regional and global socio-political processes. The research’s key question is to explore these multiple configurations of Latin America’s postcolonialism by using the urban as an analytical lens. Hence, starting



with outlining the specificities and issues that characterised Postcolonial and Decolonial approaches to Latin America, the research discusses some of the crucial debates and preoccupations in relation to the urban question in Latin America. Then, three diachronic cases of urban transformations will be analysed in detail and will discuss how Latin America's postcolonialism presented, on the one hand, specific features in comparison to other areas of the world and, on the other, the internal differences and peculiarities depending on the socio-political structure of the country investigated. The research follows the idea that, despite these internal and external discrepancies, it is possible to consider Latin America's postcolonialism as a process that was substantially coherent, that is, it was produced through the social, political and cultural imaginations that marked the making of postcolonial states in Latin America.

The length of the period considered allows me to highlight this substantial coherence of Latin America's postcolonialism in spite of several socio-political changes that occurred throughout those decades. In addition, the different spaces and periods analysed provide further elements in support of this thesis. This unusual research design offers the opportunity to look at the making of Latin America's postcolonial geography via a multiple viewpoint that is able to highlight the mentioned specificities, differences and contiguities that marked the large period under consideration. Moreover, the overlaps in the single periods considered stress some common features within the countries under analysis (as will be discussed in detail later); that is to say, the internal periodisation used is able to show some degree of socio-political linearity on a regional level. Overall, in order to show these specific configurations of Latin America's postcolonialism, the research relies on a constant action of interrogating the spatial and temporal concepts that contributed to the production of Latin America's postcolonial geographies.

The research's main goal is to dismantle – or to put it better to 'decolonise' – the traditional geographical understandings that contributed to the formation of the global area called 'Latin America'. The intersection of temporal and spatial elements is a crucial aspect to take into consideration when it comes to carrying out geographical research. The importance of *time* in critical analysis of space has been one of the crucial arguments underpinning the work of critical geographers such as, to give just some examples, David Harvey (1990), Henri Lefebvre (1991), Doreen Massey (1999, 2005) and Nigel Thrift (1977a, 1977c, 1996). For instance, as is aptly noted by Gillian Hart, Lefebvre (1991 [1974]), building on Marx's work, "refuses the conventional separation of space and time" (Hart 2016: 377).

This theoretical as well as methodological approach – as will be discussed in Chapter 3 – aims at a dialectical and non-teleological historical geography in which, borrowing Hart's words, "the focus is on processes, not things: the principle is that elements, things, and structures do not exist prior to the processes and relations that create, sustain, or undermine them" (Hart 2016: 378). Thus, it is not fruitful to consider space as an abstract entity that exists *before* the social, political, and cultural processes that articulate its historical production (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]). In this sense, *time* is crucial in two ways: first, it allows us to frame the narrative in a specific historical environment – one that speaks about both the object of investigation and the writer's own socio-cultural context –; second, it intrinsically inscribes the account into a larger historical framework that produced, in multiple ways, the specificity of the object or event (the space) under investigation. In other words, considering the constitutive importance of temporal elements in the making of space means situating the geographical investigations in specific places within the material flow of history.

In order to actualise this approach, the episodes under analysis are investigated *relationally* (Hart 2016, see Chapter 3), that is, taking into account how they participated in broader socio-political processes that, embracing more than eight decades, were strongly connected on a regional and global level. As a result, the comparison between the three episodes will be carried out by considering this multi-scalar articulation of space in which temporal elements – in the sense of the specific periods here analysed – provide a crucial lens through which to better understand the nature of its manifestations and transformations. This is a crucial point about this research's methodological stance; it is not an attempt to compare three cities following their physical and structural transformations. Rather, the research compares the national projects of modernisation *starting from* urban transformation in capital cities – discussing also the reasons why the urban was considered an element of fundamental importance within this mission. As a result, adopting a broader scale, *relational comparison* consists here in exploring how each case projected its national transformation in relation to the postcolonial idea of 'modernising' and 'civilising' each country.

Furthermore, the question of time is not used only in order to define the spatio-historical specificities described above. What will also be explored is how the idea of time generated the narration of different *temporalities* that defined each national project. That is to say, as will be discussed in Chapter 1, the postcolonial anxiety of 'catching up' with the Western countries, created specific and intertwined ideas of past, present and future that the post-independence ruling elites used to underpin and develop their national project. Hence, temporal elements were crucial also in terms of the production of temporalities that imagined, and accordingly transformed, the postcolonial countries. Again, as this research will explore, the urban was considered a formidable tool that was able to simultaneously produce and illustrate these multiple temporalities.

In so doing, the research proposes an innovative approach to the study of Latin America's urban transformations. The multi-scalar approach combined with the three locations and periods under analysis consists of an original strategy that aims to provide a multifaceted picture of Latin America's postcolonialism. Again, this is not an attempt to strictly compare these cases but is instead an effort to construct a genealogy through the investigation of how they differently participated in the making of postcolonialism across the Latin American region. The research structure differs also from the majority of Postcolonial and Decolonial approaches to the study of Latin America, as there is still an overall lack of systematic work towards the study of urbanisation from these perspectives (discussion in Chapters 1 and 2). Thus, in order to have a broad and detailed understanding of Latin America's urban transformations throughout the decades investigated, the genealogical work is of particular relevance as this is a method that allows us to explore the multiple articulations of the urban question over the decades; I call 'urban enigma' these *early manifestations* of what, starting from the 1970s, would be considered as 'the urban question'.

### ***Towards a Genealogy of Latin America's Postcolonial Urbanisation***

According to Foucault, the genealogical method "rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies" (Foucault 1984: 77); overall, there is no specific direction of history or anything that inherently leads its development and that brings it to a sort of progressive accomplishment. Likewise, refusing any kind of point of arrival, genealogy "opposes itself to the search for 'origins'" (Foucault 1984: 77). Adopting such a methodological approach, genealogy is constructed here by the exploration of three interconnected research questions, where each interrogates a specific theme. On the one hand, these themes are

understood as constitutive elements of the making of postcolonialism; that is, they are conceived as inevitable questions that were systematically at stake when it came to reorganising countries that had suffered within the colonial domain. On the other, the themes are not separable; they are actually reciprocally related and intertwined. It is not a matter of establishing hierarchies; the separation has only the analytical purpose of highlighting three important dimensions of investigation.

First, the question of *modernity*: how was modernity materialised in projects of urban transformations? In what ways did these national projects think of modernising the national space? How were capital cities involved within projects of articulation and solidification of the nation state? What were the elements of continuity, and what were the discrepancies, in projects of modernisation in Latin American countries?

Second, and strictly related to the first point, there is the question of *national identity*: the three capital cities are interrogated as metonyms of each national project. How was the national identity understood in each on the cases under analysis? How did the postcolonial projects of urban transformation involve the shaping of national identities? What were the symbolic relationships – in terms of identities – between each capital city and the rest of the country?

Third, there is the question of *temporality*: how did the temporal imagination participate in producing the nation and how it materialised within capital cities' iconic transformations? What specific ideas of past, present, and future constructed the narratives defining each national project? More precisely, how did particular conceptions of history and tradition shape the idea of the future? In other words, considering the specificities of each context, in what ways was 'postcolonial time' differently configured?

The exploration of these questions leads towards a genealogy of the urban question. More precisely, by investigating the specific shapes that postcolonial urbanism took in Latin America the research explores the socio-political and cultural processes that contributed to producing the idea of Latin America, specifically analysing how these processes can be understood as multiple rearticulations of the colonial experience. However, the three themes described are particularly wide – as they embrace the overall ‘nature’ of postcolonial projects – this space will be narrowed down by adopting a specific lens of investigation. They will be interrogated by looking at three specific processes that are particularly related to a geographical perspective: urban/rural dynamics, the relationship between national and indigenous populations, and the geopolitical dimension.

Each empirical chapter will explore how these three processes represented a crucial part of the projects of urban transformation. This is not to say that they are able to fully accomplish the critical analysis, however they constitute rhetorical devices that are able to uncover some of the key elements that underpinned the national discourse. As will be shown, each of the empirical cases interpreted these aspects in different and contradictory ways depending on the country’s specific socio-political situation. Thus, following Foucault and contrary to any linear approach, history is understood here as something that is continuously modified by the particular combination of power relations and whose results are permanently temporary. Moreover, history is therefore devoid of an absolute sense and does not exist outside of the ephemeral specificity of circumstances; a constant sense of uncertainty is bounded to its analysis. This means challenging the idea according to which “the historian’s history finds its support outside of time and pretends to base its judgments on an apocalyptic objectivity”; conversely, practicing genealogy implies an irrevocable commitment to refusing “the certainty of absolutes” (Foucault 1984: 87).

Among the cases discussed in this research, despite the mentioned inconsistencies, the research argues that there is a substantial continuity which concerns the postcolonial transformation of the world. Within this socio-political process the urban had a pivotal place, as the examples under study here aim to show. Interestingly enough, as will be demonstrated, twenty-first century discourses about the 'urban age' (for a critical response, see Brenner and Schmid 2014) were to a large extent already in place in the 1970s in many Latin American countries. The goal of this research is precisely to build the genealogy of this crucial question by looking at its antecedent manifestations in a region belonging to the 'global periphery'.

In empirical terms, as a first part of the task of dismantling Latin America's alleged unity, the research explores three specific cases of urban transformations that are characterised by different periods (although there are overlaps), ideas, and locations. The first case will investigate Buenos Aires at the turn of the twentieth century (1880-1946). The Argentine capital, known at that time as the 'southern door' of Latin America, underwent a deep physical transformation following the impact of the ideas that had lain behind the renovation of Paris, which took place between 1853 and 1870. This French/European understanding of urban modernity – which was expressed in terms of urban planning and architecture – will be at the centre of the inquiry. Thus, considering this desire to achieve both *tradition* (the prestigious cultural/political/philosophical heritage of the 'old' Europe, with Paris as its prominent centre) and *modernisation* (represented by the French capital's drastic change) the investigation will explore how these postcolonial elements materialised in the history of the 'Argentine Pavilion'.

The second case will investigate Mexico City's transformations during the post-revolutionary period (1920-1960). Here, the radical renovation of the city followed the attempt to reorganise the country after

the trauma of the Revolution. In this case the project consisted in a mixture of *past* and *present* which was understood as a fundamental move towards the modernising project. Following this tension between the controversial imagination of the past – both colonial and precolonial – coupled with the attempt to build Mexican identity, this section reconsiders the narratives underlying such postcolonial mutation in Latin America's historic northern capital by looking at the project of radical renovation of the Palace of Public Education in Mexico City.

The third case will explore the construction of Brasília (1956-1964). The Brazilian capital, which was built in its entirety between 1956 and 1960, represented an attempt to modernise the country through the radical conception of its architecture and urban planning. The adoption of the modernist model was thought able to defeat the social inequalities characterising Brazilian cities: in the wake of the ideas of Le Corbusier – the father of architectural modernism – Brasília was conceived as a space which would be able to reshape the character of the nation, ultimately bringing Brazil to the aspired stage of a 'developed' country. In order to coordinate efficiently the whole of the national space, Brasília was built in a space which is (geographically) central with respect to the country. In order to better understand this gasping race toward the *future* which characterised such an ambitious postcolonial enterprise, the research will examine the project of the Palace of National Congress.

First of all, these three pieces of empirical investigation are not conceived as *case-studies*. That is, they are not seen as episodes that indicate a sort of recurring pattern in the transformation of Latin American cities. Before discussing how (postcolonial) space is understood within this work, it is necessary to stress that these experiences are not highlighted in order to find consistencies or elements that can be helpful to trace analogies across Latin American countries through comparative approaches. Thus, they are



not identified and explored in order to show specific events that are able to be representative of some coherent and recurring pattern. However, at the same time, within such significant diversity the research will attempt to find similarities in the ways in which those processes were carried out; that is to say, it is not a matter of underlying analogous elements in terms of material transformations but, rather, it is about exploring how and through which ideas 'the urban' was a prominent – and often contradictory – strategy in promoting the national discourse. Hence, the starting point of the genealogical work consists precisely in detecting these diverse formulations of the urban enigma, diachronically, and seeing how they differently participated in the production of postcolonial Latin America.

Specifically, the research explores three specific architectural events. The first case investigates the Argentine Pavilion, which implies a focus on national and international exhibitions, and the significance of presenting specific architectural forms – and products – within these important international events. The architectural discourse of the Pavilion will be analysed by considering its importance for exploring socio-political and cultural hierarchies. The case of the Palace of Public Education is instead a governmental building in technical terms (as is Brasília's Congress); its renovations aimed to represent the changes brought by the post-revolutionary governments and, at the same time, and very importantly, the crucial importance that the sector of "Education" had for them. The third case concerns Three Powers Plaza and the Palace of National Congress; here, similarly to Mexico City, a governmental building and square were central parts of the radical project of constructing a capital city. Both technically and symbolically, they represented the material expression of Brazil's new democracy.

Thus, if on the one hand the episodes show significant differences between them, on the other, they were selected because they represented

iconic examples of architectural initiatives led by the state. In each case, the government in office, as an expression of the ruling elite, undertook ambitious projects of urban transformation through which it communicated the modernisation of the country, the renovation of its national identity, and specific temporalities that aimed to reshape each country's past and future. Therefore, the diversity of the three episodes indicates the primary importance that ruling elites gave to urban transformations in their capital cities whether this concerned exhibitions, government buildings, or central squares.

It is precisely the element of *centrality* that makes these three episodes rather similar to one another despite the different architectural contexts. Their centrality is expressed by their function, location, and by the novelty of the very architectural shape. Another important aspect that these episodes had in common, and a reason they have been selected, is their *function*: the three buildings hosted important activities in relation to the state. While the Argentine Pavilion was an international showcase to display Argentina's identity, Mexico City's Palace of Public Education had the vital task of shaping and delivering Mexico's post-revolutionary culture and Brasília's National Congress was the actual place in which political decisions were made. Thus, given the iconic nature of these buildings, the functional element is accompanied by a strong symbolical value. This centrality was expressed by their *location* within the capital city. The three buildings (as well as Three Power Plaza) were situated in the core of the urban space and obviously their visibility gave them further symbolical importance; the episode of the Argentine Pavilion is particularly interesting in this sense as it was designed in Paris (and temporarily built alongside the Eiffel Tower), a crucial place for the Argentine elites' idea of national identity. Last, but not least, this centrality was expressed in *architectural terms*, in the sense that in the construction and renovation of the three buildings (again, and of Brasília's square as well) the physical and

aesthetical elements had primary attention. In addition to the architectural style – which played a prominent role in their discursive strategy – their great size was a further element in common (for instance, Brasília's National Congress was designed to be the tallest building in Brasília). Here again, this particular narrative strategy enhanced the symbolic importance of these architectural episodes.

Hence, to sum up, the three episodes were chosen according to specific features that make them part of similar projects of urban transformation in capital cities, especially thinking of *iconic* episodes of transformation. They will be investigated as prominent examples of how each country, by simultaneously reflecting and posing a solution to similar problems (mainly that of modernisation), articulated a different configuration of Latin America's postcolonialism. I will discuss in detail in Chapter 3 the specific itinerary that made me decide on the chosen buildings in each city under investigation.

This methodological approach allows the research to frame the postcolonial question from multiple viewpoints, which means exploring its constant rearticulations across the Latin American region, rather than attempting to build a sort of exhaustive picture containing the totality of the pieces. This distinctive aspect of the research was essentially an inevitable decision when I set the goal of exploring the genealogy of Latin America's space (see previous section). This implied the necessity to see the making of postcolonialism by following its continuities and disruptions, that is to say focusing not only on its specific configurations but also, and very importantly, individualising the constant *motion* of these socio-political and cultural processes. In this research, the urban is the analytical lens adopted to capture and analyse these multiple expressions of postcolonialism in Latin America, focusing also in its moments of change. Therefore, in addition to the choice of the architectural episodes, the internal

periodisation is an element of crucial importance and whose articulation is organised according to the need to respond to the research's goals.

As mentioned earlier, there are *overlaps* between the periods analysed. This aims to show the 'danger' of a misleading linear approach to the narrations. For example, in terms of urban transformations – and therefore looking specifically at elements such as urban planning and architecture – there are some visible patterns and tendencies that to some degree have characterised probably all Latin American countries (Hardoy 1992; Almandoz 2002). Nonetheless, this does not mean that there has been an absolute uniformity that defined the historical intervals. Rather, in general terms, there were models that constituted important examples for the processes of urban renovation across Latin America. To briefly mention just two cases – which will be discussed in detail on several occasions throughout the following chapters – the mid-nineteenth century renovation of Paris and 1930s modernist ideas (coming also from the Euro-American world) represented significant archetypes that very often strongly influenced the transformation of major Latin American cities<sup>2</sup>.

More precisely, these projects normally acted within wider plans of reorganisation of the national identity, and this is the significance of each period analysed here. Therefore, above all, the temporal overlaps are crucially able to indicate phases of *transition* of these national projects – due to specific political, social, and economic reasons – as well as the possibility to detect connections between the cases, building on the tension between crisis and novelty. Thereby, it is possible to join the three cases by means of this *double line* of continuity and discrepancy, a contradictory line that allows the uncovering on the one hand of some similar elements across the

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<sup>2</sup> Hence, if these models are able to indicate historical periods and ideas that defined the areas where they were promoted – that is, what is generally understood as 'the West' – their often acritical reception in Latin America showed, at the same time, a sort of subaltern relationship to those centres of production of 'technical' knowledge.

Latin American space and, on the other, the divergencies and high degree of diversity that marked the development and crises of the projects investigated. Dates are therefore used as references to shore up the genealogical work and are able, rather than listing a mere succession of facts, to detect moments of connection, transition, and deviation within and beyond the cases studied.

### ***Methodological Remarks***

In methodological terms, by avoiding an understanding of the enquiry in a strictly linear sense, the research intends to *disarticulate* the urban question, both spatially and temporally, and openly consign itself to what Foucault delineated as a tendency towards “dissipation” (Foucault 1984: 95). This obviously does not mean denying the presence of relations, connections, and various degrees of continuity; on the contrary, it is about shattering the historical narration as a straight development of events and reconstructing from its fragments a picture which is differently assembled.

The research looks in particular at the production of *public discourses* to analyse how the iconic urban transformations were strictly connected to broader concepts such modernisation and national identity, exploring the implications of these concepts in terms of the production of specific temporalities specifically in relation to three aforementioned key themes: urban/rural dynamics, the relationship between national and indigenous populations, and the geopolitical dimension. More specifically, the research investigates the production of public discourses within the ruling elites, that is, the analysis of the ideas through which the ruling elites promoted and supported the episodes of urban transformation. In this sense, the archival work will particularly involve what I defined as ‘the protagonists of the archive’ (see Chapter 3), namely the subjects that were

of crucial importance within the state organisation and that, in this case, were also prominent figures within the event of urban transformation. Thus, the research analyses the discourse of politicians, architects, and artists in addition to that of observers and journalists in national newspapers and magazines (as they normally belonged to the ruling elites). These are the protagonists of the archives in the sense that they represent a 'voice' that is largely present in the archives; a pervasive voice that indicates the power relations that characterised Latin America's postcolonial processes (the plural here aims to stress the manifold and non-linear nature of the postcolonial). Specific implication of this fact, such as the way the archival research was carried out as well as the very location of the archives, will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Therefore, the research analyses this dominant voice in order to see how the elites ruling the countries *conceived* and *promoted* the episodes of urban transformations under analysis. In this sense, following the words of Jane M. Jacobs, "discursive and representational practices are in a mutually constitutive relationship with political and economic forces" and, "together, they actively create the material and imaginary landscapes of the city" (Jacobs 2006: 9). It is precisely by looking at the close relationship between cities' transformations, socio-political forces, and discursive strategies that underpinned such changes that this study explores the controversial ways through which the national space was produced and narrated. In other words, drawing again on Foucault, it is by exploring and reconstructing the "economy of discourses" (Foucault 1998: 68) that it is possible to disentangle the complexity of the national processes; that is to say, the fact of rebuilding the narrative production that flooded society at that time allows us to detect "their [discourses'] intrinsic technology, the necessities of their operation, the tactics they employ, the effects of power which underlie them and which they transmit" (Foucault 1998: 68-69).

Hence, looking at primary sources produced within the circle of the ruling elites – such as official reports, politicians' public discourse and memories, national newspapers and magazines – makes it possible to see the ideas and strategies that they adopted in order to *modernise* their respective countries. These are ideas that on the one hand concerned urbanisation and processes of national transformation, and on the other were used in strong connection with other factors such as, as will be discussed later, *population* and *race* in order to envisage the best modality to shape a 'modern' nation. Hence, it was not the case of tracing a new history by means of new and unknown sources, nor the fact of articulating an original combination of sources in order to tell a new history; rather, the goal was to highlight a certain hegemonic discourse about each country's national project during specific periods and put them in tension with postcolonial and decolonial theoretical constructions. The result of this intertwined analysis is a picture of Latin American history that is by definition not complete and that involves the ways in which Latin America was produced and understood in relation to national, regional, and international geo-political imaginations.

With regard to the periodisation, the decades examined in this work represent a period in which the centrality of the state corresponded to its prominent role in relation to the transformation of the urban environment and especially, for the reasons just discussed, of capital cities. This importance was the result of what was normally treated as a crucial goal in relation to the solidification and naturalisation of the role of the state, that is, the production of *national identity*. In this sense, postcolonial scholarship offered pivotal contributions in discussing how the post-imperial period was entangled in the trap of producing independent states by means of tools borrowed from the European colonial powers such as, in addition to the very conception of state, the connected ideas of *nation* and *modernity* (for example, to mention some relevant studies in relation to the Indian case,

which has been a central frame of reference for postcolonial studies, Chatterjee 1986, 1993; Guha and Spivak 1988; Goswami 2004).

Hence, if the decades under study were characterised by the strong role of the state in the national processes including those related to urban transformations, things began progressively to change in the early 1970s. 1964 indicates in this work the threshold of such a transformation. On the one hand, the year represented specifically the end of the progressive dream that marked Juscelino Kubitschek's presidency in Brazil (within which the construction of Brasília was one of its most determining actions): the military coup abruptly suppressed Brazil's democratic hopes for next three decades. On the other hand, the 1960s would be the last decade of the absolute hegemony of the state: the military coup which occurred in Chile in 1973 consisted in the first experiment of neoliberal policies in Latin America (Harvey 2005) and began a period – one that would be clearly visible in the 1980s and 1990s – in which the state progressively lost its overwhelming centrality and instead assisted the entrance of the free market within the national economies. The significant changes that such an event brought would obviously also affect the transformations of the urban environment. Therefore, the period of time analysed in this study (1880-1964) is defined by the distinctive presence of the state over national activities. Accordingly, the main attention is given to transformations and events that were led by the state itself. By doing so, the research builds a historical geography that explores the urban enigma by focusing on three geographical processes: the urban/rural dynamics, the relations between national and indigenous populations, and the geopolitical dimension.

### *Postcolonial and Decolonial Concepts for Latin America*



Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies constitute the main theoretical lens that frames this research. More specifically, following the primary necessity to conceptualise the space under analysis, that is to say, to define the spatio-historical specificities that shape the context of the investigation, this research refers to *postcolonial Latin America*. The definition is articulated around of two concepts that are strongly tied together. Starting with the latter, 'Latin America' is an *idea* (Mignolo 2005) which already implies on its own the long history that 'began' with European colonialism. On the other side, 'postcolonial' here means the *quality* of the social, political, and cultural relationships that globally characterised the diffusion of manifold systems of thought and practices inherited from the colonial experience. While postcolonialism, on the one hand, contains a temporal component which is clearly visible in that *post* at the beginning of the word, on the other, it also means something which goes *beyond* the common use of colonialism (Blunt and Wills 2000: 169). The complex relationship with past and history is therefore immediately at stake.

In order to avoid the risk of (over)simplification – that is, of conceiving postcolonialism as a process that operates evenly – the research breaks the 'postcolonial' into its Latin American specificities and, likewise, breaks Latin America into further areas of investigation. Nonetheless, the three episodes are conceived here not as fragments that, once placed one next to the other, go on to form a full and coherent picture but, borrowing Luis E. Carranza's words describing his book on Mexican architecture, "do overlap and are intended to be read dialectically against each other and against traditional historiography" (Carranza 2010: 12). As a result, Latin American space is analysed here through this mutual, continuous, and contradictory transformation that is explored by means of the multiplicity of discourses and practices that have been crucial for producing what is understood as 'Latin America'. In this sense, the work of Postcolonial Studies is fundamental in order to provide an understanding of Latin

American space that is simultaneously convincing and (strategically) problematic.

Taking into account the constitutive role of European colonialism in the cultural and material configuration of the world during and after colonialism itself, Postcolonial Studies consisted in a formidable set of tools that have been able to reappraise modern and contemporary history – as well as the present – and, very importantly, have challenged the colonial/Eurocentric epistemologies that produced what has traditionally been regarded as ‘universal’ knowledge (Said 1978, 1993; Guha and Spivak 1988; Spivak 1988; Chatterjee 1993; Bhabha 2004; Chakrabarty 2000; Young 2001). Moreover, this rich and diverse body of literature includes a section of work that has been specifically concerned with issues related to the production of the urban environment and has highlighted how cities are strategic places in which and through which, despite the end of colonialism, colonial relationships are still reorganised, both in symbolic and material terms (King 1990, 2004; AlSayyad, 1992; Jacobs 1996; Bishop, Phillips and Yeo, 2003; Robinson 2006, 2015; Rao 2006; Roy 2009a, 2011; Simone 2010; Chatterjee 2012). Building on this set of studies the research provides its specific understanding of Latin American space as something that would be unlikely to be efficaciously discussed without taking into account the body of reflections brought by postcolonial thinkers. However, this is far from being exhaustive. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, Latin America has traditionally constituted a problematic place within the intellectual production marking Postcolonial Studies; that is to say, especially in its first two decades (the 1970s and 1980s), very rarely have works in this field discussed topics concerning Latin America or included Latin American thinkers within their critical reflection (Coronil 2004). Things started to change in the 1990s with the work of Decolonial Studies that, building on the experience of Postcolonial Studies as well as on the notable contributions of some Latin American critical (especially Marxist)

scholarship, began to produce what is seen here as an original and well-defined *configuration* of Postcolonial Studies in Latin America (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992; Mignolo 1995, 2000, 2005; Lander 2000; Dussel 2007). As I will show in more detail later, there is a lively debate about the degree of affinity between the two scholarships, as some decolonial thinkers claim to be detached from any Western school of thought, included Postcolonial Studies (for example, Grosfoguel 2011).

In any case, although decolonial scholarship has been looking at a variety of fields of study – using a strong interdisciplinary approach – including history, sociology, literature, geography (particularly in relation to issues related to mapping the ‘new’ world), it still lacks a systematic investigation of issues directly related to cities and urbanisation as a whole. More specifically, there is a vacuum in the scholarship with regard to how crucial concepts such as *coloniality* (Quijano 2000, 2007), *matrix of power* [colonial difference] (Mignolo 2011), or the very idea of *(under)development* (Escobar 1995) have been urbanised; that is, how cities have crucially contributed to reproducing and propagating the fundamental practices and ideas that marked the arrival of colonialism in the Americas. In this sense, the urban enigma refers also to the curious and remarkable relative absence around urban questions within the decolonial literature.

It is by building on the relationship between Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies that this research aims to depict an urban geography capable of describing the controversial relations between power and knowledge which have been defining the space known as ‘Latin America’. However, looking at the sources that inspired and fuelled the work of decolonial thinkers, in addition to the fundamental contribution of Postcolonial Studies there is also that of Dependency Theory, a crucial scholarship originating in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America that renovated international Marxist debates from the standpoint and distinct

experiences of the world periphery (Furtado 1964; Frank 1970; Cardoso and Faletto 1979 [1969]). Furthermore, and very importantly, dependency theorists, starting from their analysis that ascribed Latin American 'under-development' to the global asymmetries of power rather than to any alleged internal incompetence (as claimed by modernisation theorists, such as Rostow 1990 [1960]), paid particular attention to the way in which the urban environment was embodying these global hierarchies as well as, more specifically, the transformations that were occurring on a global scale (Schteingart 1973; Cardoso 1975; Hardoy 1975a; Castells 1977; Quijano 1977). Thus, and especially focusing on the original work of Aníbal Quijano at the turn of the 1970s (Quijano 1967, 1968, 1977), this research explores how debates on *planetary urbanisation* (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]) that characterised the European Marxist discussion at that time – and that have stimulated influential critical contributions up until today (Brenner 2009; Merrifield 2014; Brenner and Schmid 2015) – were in fact framed *simultaneously* (and, as we will see in Chapter 2, with similar outcomes) from somewhere *outside* the West. In relation to this question, Latin America is therefore mobilised as a critical lens through which it is possible to add relevant elements of reflection that are able to differently articulate – and perhaps to partly *provincialize* (Chakrabarty 2000) – what is seen as the 'global' map of critical urban studies. Furthermore, it is also crucial to stress the fact that taking such a postcolonial/decolonial stance within this research does not mean taking a rigid and indisputable position but, on the contrary, it is the attempt to openly bend theoretical concepts according to the spatio-historical specificities of the analysis as well as, more importantly, to open up a space for further discussion with contributions and criticism coming from other critical approaches.

To sum up, this research is situated at the crossroads of Postcolonial Studies and Decolonial Studies. On the one hand, it adopts the conceptual framework and theoretical tools that have defined Postcolonial theorists.

On the other, the research mobilises the experience of Decolonial scholars in order to refine this framework and make it particularly suitable for the study of Latin America. The most important point to underline is that Postcolonial Theory has largely been generated to study the Anglophone and, to a lesser extent, the Francophone world (Coronil 2004; Mbembe et al 2006). Hence, despite the fact that Postcolonial scholarship provides a large and diverse collection of studies – both in terms of the number of disciplines it has touched and its several decades of experience – its results to me are somehow not fully satisfactory when it comes to studying Latin America. The spaces Postcolonial scholars have traditionally investigated share substantial differences with Latin America's geo-social history. As a result, this set of theoretical tools is sometimes limited; to give just one example, Postcolonial thinkers normally consider the Enlightenment as a foundational moment to understand the colonial logic, a fact that of course cannot be applied to the Latin American experience given its earlier experience within the colonial dominion (see discussion in Chapter 1).

On the other hand, Decolonial Theory provides us with excellent tools to overcome these shortcomings, such as Quijano's concept of *coloniality of power* (Quijano 2000, 2007), that is, a global division of labour articulated on racial bases that began with the conquest of the Americas. However, while Decolonial Theory have investigated several areas of study (for instance, Dussel 1995; Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2005), it seems not to be sufficient for a deep understanding of these questions in relation to the urban scale. Probably due also to its relatively brief life, this scholarship lacks tools when it comes to analysing specific themes that it has not explored yet, such as cities and the transformation of the urban environment. While some concepts can be extremely helpful to study urban geographies, such as the aforementioned coloniality, there is a need for further elements in order to articulate a rich and convincing analysis. This is why in the title of this research I stressed that this is a move *towards* a

decolonial (urban) geography, showing the intention to make a contribution to that scholarship and, at the same time, highlighting its theoretical gaps.

Hence, assuming a position similar to that expressed by Gurminder Bhambra (2014), I do not consider Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies as theoretical rivals but, on the contrary, as formidable providers of analytical tools whose main concern is the multiple ways and contexts in which the colonial action has been able to rearticulate itself. These questions will be explored in detail in Chapters 1 and 2. For now, I would like to stress that this research is positioned precisely at the intersection between Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies and aims to build a space in which the two scholarships can mutually enrich and reinforce each other and, hopefully, break the border that separates them. Being situated on such a theoretical perspective, this research aims on the one hand to renew Postcolonial scholarship's toolkit for the study of Latin America and, on the other, to push Decolonial scholarship towards the field of Urban Studies.

### *Population, Race, Nation*

By taking into account a long period of time, this work focuses on an epoch in which the state played an undisputed role in the socio-political organisation of Latin American countries. Despite the fact that most of these countries achieved independence from the European empires by the second decade of the nineteenth century, the process of organisation and control of the territory normally took decades before reaching the actual domination over the totality of the space. Depending on the countries in question, indigenous populations and caudillos often organised strong resistance against the new political order that, normally through an extensive use of

violence, aspired to absolute control within what had become the national borders. In this sense, 1880 represented an important date for the Southern Cone; during that year Buenos Aires, thanks to a succession of several political and military victories across the country, officially became the Argentine capital and concentrated a great amount of political power around itself. By stressing the significance of this event, this research wants to specifically underline two connected factors: first, the consolidation of state power that progressively characterised the action of post-independence countries at the dawn of the twentieth century; second, the strong relationship between the new countries and their capital cities. To various degrees depending on the case, the capital played a double role: on the one side it intended to produce and reinforce national power and on the other it exerted a hegemonic role over the national space that, I argue, could often be understood as *internal colonialism* (Casanova 1965; Stone 1979; Gutiérrez 2004). Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Brasília certainly displayed, with the distinctive specificities of each case, the array of tensions determining this controversial relationship.

One of the most prominent preoccupations that characterised the projects of urban transformation was that of population. On the one hand, population was elaborated spatially, that is, in terms of its distribution across the national territory; on the other, there were concerns about its very composition, a matter around which the question of race emerged. In any case, in Latin America population became one of the crucial “disciplines [that] were part of the post-Enlightenment project associated with totalising narratives, structuralist explanations, and modernisation programmes” (Legg 2005: 140). Of course, as will be discussed in the empirical chapters, these concepts (and practices) were borrowed from the European experience, something that was often thought of as providing a successful

organisational model of nation state<sup>3</sup>. In other words, to reference Stephen Legg's insightful reading of Foucault, "from the local to the urban to the national" there had been "an increasing scale in which 'population' gradually attune[d] itself to the 'nation'" (Legg 2005: 141). More specifically, as Foucault emphasised, modern "power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population" (Foucault 1998: 137). Whether through the stigmatisation of the indigenous population in Argentina, the rhetorical invention of races in post-revolutionary Mexico, or through the construction of new capital city in the geographical centre of Brazil, the theme of population was a priority for undertaking national projects within the cases analysed herein.

Very importantly, the 'problem' of the population implied a special attention to racial elements. This is one of the essential factors that makes a postcolonial/decolonial approach particularly significant. For example, the end of the colonial period in Latin American represented a reinforcement of the racial classifications that had been in place since the arrival of the Europeans. More specifically, during the struggle against empire "pro-independence elites revamped the racial divisions created under colonial rule" (Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Rossemblat 2003: 4). In the aftermath of the liberation wars the intellectual sections of the ruling elites "borrowed frequently if selectively from the new currents of racial science emerging in Europe [...]" and in such way, "armed with the legitimizing shield of modern science, they used the resources of expanding central states to measure, count, classify – and then improve – national populations" (Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Rossemblat 2003: 6). Thus, by a sort of paradox, independence in Latin American countries quite often signified a strengthening of the social relations brought by colonialism. There were

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<sup>3</sup> This is somewhat controversial as Latin America in the aftermath of the achievement of independence assisted in some of the first experiments in the construction of the nation state (Anderson 2006 [1983]: 47-66).



two fundamental elements that could explain this. First, the elites that lead the independence movements were normally European descendants who wanted to reinforce their social position and make it 'natural' and unchallengeable in the new national order. Second, intellectual production coming from Europe provided further material in order to lend these racial hierarchies the 'scientific' sense that was thought to be at the basis of the modern nation<sup>4</sup>. As a result, although configured differently depending on national and regional geographies, racism and racist ideologies became indispensable for animating the formulation of this incipient nationalism (Graham 1990; Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Rossemblat 2003; Wade, Giraldo, and Viveros 2008; Wade 2010).

In this way, looking at urban transformations here means examining multiple and intertwined histories. As a whole, these elements indicate the specific nature of the *national project* that was at stake in each case. Both in the case of technical notions in relation to urban planning and architecture, and in ways of conceiving the national population, *knowledge* – and its circulation across the Atlantic (and later across the United States border) – was a crucial tool that lent strong support and justification to the proposed changes. Hence, exploring the discourses that produced and accompanied these urban renovations is of strategic importance since, especially through the mainstream media, the ruling elites promoted the projects by means of constant references to the innovative notions that supported the works. After all, as was famously stressed by Foucault, "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (Foucault 1998: 100).

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<sup>4</sup> As Foucault strongly noted speaking about the European world, modern racism took place precisely starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, "it was then that a whole politics of settlement (*peuplement*), family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life, received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of race." (Foucault 1998: 149)

Hence, this project aims to articulate a critical understanding of the very concept of 'Latin America'. Going well beyond the mere expression of an unchangeable geographical form, Latin America consists in a geo-social construction that has been produced over the centuries and that had its turning point with the arrival of the European coloniser. Perhaps paradoxically, such colonial shape even began to be strengthened during the post-independence period, when the adjective 'Latin' was applied to define, through a combination of European political desires first and United States racial classification later (see chapter 1), the specific 'nature' of this area of the Americas. By discussing some of the important geo-political events that marked the countries under investigation during the span of time analysed and, more specifically, by exploring how these projects of urban and national renovation responded – directly or indirectly – to this Euro-American understanding of the region, this research aims to challenge the traditional understanding of 'Latin America' as a coherent and stable geographical definition.

Following this theoretical and political challenge, there have been attempts to conceptualise Latin America through different definitions that were meant to eradicate these (post)colonial relations underpinning the concept. For instance, Walter Mignolo proposed the term "After-America" (Mignolo 2005: 149-162) and José David Saldívar, suggesting the removal of the sharp division with North America, preferred to think of the Americas through the idea of "Trans-Americanity" (Saldívar 2012). However, despite these significant efforts to defy the *coloniality* (Quijano 2000, 2007) that constitutively produced the concept of Latin America, these definitions have not managed to spread beyond the narrow circles of discussion within which they were produced. Of course, it is not the scope of this work to devise an innovative term to solve this question; there are long socio-historical sedimentations that entrench the geographical terminology within its traditional definitions, and it is perhaps only through likewise

strong political theorisations and actions that such an architecture of knowledge can be progressively dismantled. However, although within this research the term Latin America is used to describe such geo-social expression resulting from the effects of the colonial period, there is the strong attempt to put the term under a constant tension in order to show its constitutive inadequateness. Therefore, avoiding reliance on any geographical determinism, it is fundamental to explore the spatio-historical elements that contributed to the production of Latin America as an alleged coherent concept. In this regard, a critical geographical reflection is absolutely essential.

### *The Architectural Gaze*

Thinking about spatial transformations, and with particular regard to changes within the urban fabric, architecture is one of the more 'natural' – evident – places in which such transformations can be seen. This fact is even more apparent in capital cities, which tend to be the main places in which states represent themselves in terms of power, prestige, and national identity. This of course it is not to say, as discussed earlier, that capital cities are 'only' a space of representation; the role of architecture within a critical understanding of spatial questions during the capitalist era has been investigated, to different degrees, over the last decades. Within the central interest that questions about the urban attracted from the 1970s, architecture played a significant role in describing such dramatic transformations. According to this critical approach architecture should be thought as a *social product* from which it is possible to look and analyse the particular function of capitalism as mode of production (a wide collection of views, from a Marxist perspective, is given in Hays 1998).

The newborn Latin American states saw capital cities as crucial in displaying their place in the world in political, economic and cultural terms (Almandoz 2002). Thus, from this point of view, exploring the physical expression of the urban environment means not only investigating the material relations which produced it but also the geo-political imagination which these transformations intended to express. The shaping and solidification of the nation state from the world periphery also meant placing the country on the international map; that is to say, it involved staging the country into regional and global socio-political geographies. For example, one important case is Argentina's participation in the 1889 Paris World Exposition, where the ruling elites manifested their international aspiration through the material shapes of the pavilion (chapter 4). Similar elements were present both in Mexico City's Palace of Education – through architectural styles recalling at the same time the pre-colonial and colonial past – and in Brasília's National Congress, where the adoption of modernist techniques and aesthetics demonstrated a desire to occupy the forefront of the international scene. In relation to this point, it is of particular significance to recall Jacobs, who described the post-imperial city as “a space of desire, a place in a struggle between ‘becoming’ and ‘remaining’” (J.M. Jacobs 1996: 39). As we will see throughout the empirical chapters, this twofold doubt was permanently in place within postcolonial capital cities' transformations, and each case interpreted specific and often contradictory visions of past and future.

The end of the colonial period normally entailed the vital task of imposing a “national homogeneity upon a multitude of groups with divergent interests and cultural claims” (Lu 2011: 13) and capital cities were obviously crucial in this sense. Iconic architecture is therefore able to materialise the social and political values that were at stake at the moment of transformation. Once again, geographies of knowledge are extremely revealing in uncovering power relations. For instance, within a wide

reappraisal of the meaning of modernist architecture in the peripheral and postcolonial world (Lu 2011), Jiat-Hwee Chang stressed that when investigating architectural forms, it is particularly relevant to think about their *movement*, in terms of “network, circulation and translation” across the world (Chang 2011: 229). Within this framework, the role of power should be considered as more important than architectural studies usually recognise: power, in architecture as well, should be seen “as something more pervasive, ubiquitous and productive, shaping knowledge and practices linked to the production of the larger built environment” (Chang 2011: 229). It is not only the matter of recognising the existence of global asymmetries that often implied the global hegemony of specific architectural styles coming from the metropolises (such as in the case of modernism), it is also the question of individuating the power relations existing on an internal level. To give only one example, the adoption of styles attributable to indigenous traditions might offer some indicative hints about the native populations’ involvement in the national process. As will be seen in the empirical chapters, iconic architectural transformations shed light on the balances and conflicts within each country’s national population.

In relation to Latin America as a whole, the concept of *hybridisation* has been used in order to describe the ambiguous composition of national cultures that is shaped by power relations resulting from controversial concepts such as ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ (García Canclini 1995). With regard to architecture, in a similar sense, Keith Eggener saw a substantial negation of Western modernity within Latin American architecture (Eggener 2002). More precisely, Eggener pointed out that the objective of modernity has fundamentally failed in favour of definite architectural configurations which are the exclusive product of the specific Latin American context (Eggener 2002: 233). His critique is particularly addressed to the movement of so-called Critical Regionalism, which saw Latin

American architecture as a form of resistance against Western hegemony, described in architectural language as the International Style (Frampton 1983, 1986; Tzonis and Lefaivre 2003). The multiple possibilities of understanding architectural space and architectural change that are suggested by these studies are particularly helpful in considering the contradictions of geo-political relations. However, looking from a historical perspective, iconic architecture was conceived in relation to strong ideas of national identity; more specifically, the choice of adopting specific architectural styles and materials had the explicit goal of framing the countries within a certain geo-political and cultural area of the world. In other words, as this research highlights in the empirical examples, architecture talks about national, regional and global geographies and, by doing so, is able to underscore the elements that strongly and strategically contributed to the articulation of each country's national identity.

Within this approach to architecture, buildings play a central role in summarising the main features of national projects. As will be explored in the empirical chapters, iconic buildings are able to express strong ideological concepts through their materiality. Being the residence of important activities such as, in this case, governmental institutions and international exhibitions, these buildings attract a particular attention as they merge the symbolic significance of their role with the plastic elements that compose them. The result is a sort of explosion of sense from which it is possible to rearticulate the main ideas that distinguished the national project during the buildings' period of construction or renovation.

Furthermore, while postcolonialism has usually been blamed for concentrating its analysis on literary texts, buildings offer a material substance to investigate colonial and postcolonial processes starting from what they actually produced (King 2003; McEwan 2003). In other words, the materiality of buildings is able to provide a firmer grasp of reality than

Postcolonial Studies which means, in wider terms, a general encouragement to focus on the “historical, economic, and material dimensions [that] have persistently been excluded” (King 2003: 169). This ‘material turn’ has allowed scholars on the one hand to see the *physical expression* of the asymmetrical relationships that are a legacy of colonialism, and on the other, conversely, to understand architecture and buildings as *things*<sup>5</sup> from which it is possible to extrapolate the configuration of those relationships. Hence, buildings are also understandable as discursive constructions (Jacob 2006: 3) that belong to the socio-political environment that produced them. As Tariq Jazeel points up,

“Built space, however, is neither autonomous nor self-referential. That is to say, its symbolic resonances, its meanings, are never produced in a vacuum. Architecture as both process and material form exists in and through the world, thus the signification of buildings is irreducibly relational and contingent upon its imbrication in expanded social fields” (Jazeel 2017b: 139).

By looking at the ‘Argentine Pavilion’, Mexico City’s Palace of Public Education, and Brasília’s Palace of National Congress the research will explore such a materiality of the postcolonial, reflecting upon the desires, objectives, and contradictions that contributed to the production of Latin America.

### ***Dissertation Structure***

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I use this expression building on Jacobs’s definition of highrises as “big things” in order to focus on their social aspects instead of on the mere “constructivist force” associated to traditional terms such as “architecture, building or housing” (Jacobs 2006: 3).

The dissertation will proceed as follows. The first two chapters will discuss the theoretical framework. Chapter 1 discusses the significance of Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies for a critical understanding of Latin America. By reconstructing the genealogy of Decolonial Studies, the chapter argues that the two scholarships cannot be conceived as sharply separated from each other; instead, on the contrary, they are seen within a relatively coherent development of critical thought both internal and external to Latin America. By doing so, the chapter establishes a first set of concepts that are used in this research. Chapter 2 continues the theoretical exploration by discussing the Latin American space in terms of the urban geographies that contributed to producing it. After discussing the importance of cities in building the newborn nation states, the discussion goes through the debates about urban studies that characterised the 1960s and 1970s by highlighting the contrasts and similarities between critical thinkers in Europe and Latin America and, finally, aiming to engage with questions in relation to the geographies of knowledge production. Chapter 3 concerns the research's methodology. The chapter discusses how the three empirical cases have been investigated and put into a unique theoretical framework, and it goes through debates concerning comparative strategies in urban studies taking into account advantages and limits. In addition, the chapter underlines the main questions about how to approach the archive and shows how the archival work has been carried out. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 concern the empirical work. Following the timeline structure, these chapters are about Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Brasília, respectively. They have similar structure, that is, each chapter briefly 'introduces' its respective city through a section describing its urban history and, after a presentation of the historical context marking each case, the chapter moves to its central part by discussing in detail the specific project under analysis. Finally, the Conclusions section discusses the three cases together and shows the general outcomes of the investigation. In addition to debating the



achievements of historical geography built in this study, this last section envisages some perspectives for future research.

# CHAPTER 1. Postcolonialism in the New World. Time, Space, Hierarchies: The Production of Latin America

## *Introduction*

At first glance, the history of Postcolonialism does not have any particular references to the Latin American world. Starting from the late 1970s in the Anglo-Saxon world through the groundbreaking work of Edward Said (Said 1978, 1993), Postcolonial Studies demarcated an innovative field of research highlighting the Western/colonial epistemologies characterising 'universal' knowledge. By using a multidisciplinary approach, these studies explored a wide geography. Shortly after Said and maintaining a marked Anglophone production, the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) made another critical contribution to the spreading and innovation of the Postcolonial experience (Chatterjee 1986, 2004; Chakrabarty 2000; Guha 1997; Guha and Spivak 1988), and inspired other attempts in other places during the following years, such as the critical investigation of Africa (Mudimbe 1988, 1994). As far as Latin America is concerned, the postcolonial question remained substantially unsolved until the arrival of Decolonial Studies in the 1990s. By discussing some crucial elements in relation to Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies, the chapter outlines a conceptual framework for a critical investigation of Latin America.

The postcolonial scholarship, especially thanks to the foundational Asian experience, offered important ideas that challenged Eurocentric paradigms. For example, a strong contribution came from the critique of the conceptions of *time* and *history*, challenging their putative linearity, by which postcolonial thinkers deconstructed the obsessive aspirations

towards modernisation and development (Chakrabarty 2000). In relation to the Americas, these temporal narratives were spatialised since the period of the conquest and, being combined with racial elements, eventually split the 'New World' into two parts and contributed to the formation of the global area called 'Latin America'. More specifically, Latin America as a racial concept was shaped from a double direction: on the one hand, Europe conceived that part of the Americas as something that was 'naturally' under their control - given the affinity with the 'Latin' element -, on the other, this hierarchy was reconfigured internally in a way in which the Latin lineage (namely, European) signified an undisputed state of privilege in the organisation of post-independence states.

In order to retrace this genealogy of Latin American space, the chapter unpacks concepts such as *time*, *history*, and *modernity* and examines how they participated in the materialisation of geographical knowledge that naturalised the colonial viewpoint. In addition, concepts such as *Americanity* (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992) and *coloniality* highlights the violent modalities through which the Americas were inserted into the global scene, consisting in the specific way the *(post)colonial* acted in these areas of the world. Thus, the chapter argues that Decolonial Studies did not represent a sharp epistemological rupture with previous schools of critical thought - especially with that of Postcolonial Studies - as some of their exponents claimed. Without disregarding the innovations brought by the decolonial experience, a double source of inspiration seems crucial for this scholarship: one external to Latin America, Postcolonial Studies and another internal Dependency Theory. Decolonial Studies are therefore understood as a specific configuration of Postcolonial Studies in Latin America. By putting in dialogue the two schools of thought, the chapter aims to shape a conceptual grid that is specific for an innovative study of Latin American space.

## *The Postcolonial Question in Latin America*

Latin America has been investigated from multiple angles within critical perspectives. In particular, beginning with the experience of Dependency Theory in the 1960s and 1970s, the theme of colonialism gained a progressively stronger interest within analysis that aimed to explore and understand the specificities of the Latin American context. In this regard, Dependency theorists represented an innovative example of Marxism in Latin America, that is, an attempt to bend Marxist theory to the specific condition that was the result of colonialism and could not be understood without considering the 'long' colonial history. However, before delving into these debates, it is necessary to stress the critical importance of Marxism in Latin America throughout the twentieth century. Although this is not the place to offer an exhaustive account, it is worth mentioning at least the crucial work of José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930) at the beginning of the century, a theorist forged a version of Marxism which was shaped according to the specific needs of Peru's indigenous and peasant masses (Mariátegui 1971 [1928]).

Mariátegui would become a crucial figure for non-orthodox Marxist thinkers in the region<sup>6</sup> who aimed to achieve on the one hand a sophisticated reading of capitalist society and the strategies to subvert it and, on the other, an elaborated understanding of the specificities of the postcolonial context that would allow the theory to work effectively. Dependency theorists were the earliest and most important case in this direction. For instance, Quijano, an important figure for *dependentistas* – and crucially, for Postcolonial and Decolonial approaches later – worked

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<sup>6</sup> Another important figure in this context is the Peruvian Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre (1895-1979); without being a Marxist, Haya de la Torre engaged in lively discussions with Mariátegui (see, for example, Germana 1977) and famously founded the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) in 1924.

extensively on Mariátegui's texts (for example, Quijano 1981, 1995). This does not mean implying a direct connection between Mariátegui and Dependency theories, my intention is instead to trace some preliminary lines that lead to postcolonial debates in Latin America<sup>7</sup>.

In this sense, the experience of Dependency Theory is of primary importance. As mentioned above, this school of thought offered a theoretical framework that understood the Latin American socio-political and economic situation by starting from a consideration of its peripheral role in the 'world system' (a concept elaborated by Immanuel Wallerstein [1974, 1980, 1989]). Challenging the theories of modernisation that marked the decades following World War II (Hoselitz 1960; Rostow 1990 [1960]), Dependency theorists claimed that Latin America's problems were the result of the global hierarchies generated by the geographies of colonialism. More specifically, responding to the modernising scholars and their primary attention on economic elements, *dependentistas* explained Latin America's gap in 'development' as a result of its *colonial heritage* (Stein and Stein 1970). Economics was therefore the main field of battle and it was actually within the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) that the earlier formulations of dependency were articulated (Prebisch 1950). During the 1960s and 1970s a rich literature argued the necessity to understand Latin America according to a centre/periphery model that explained the socio-economic differences between the global regions

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<sup>7</sup> There are of course many other Marxist and non-Marxist thinkers that could be mentioned; given the content of the conversation it is worth recalling the importance of Antonio Gramsci's thought in Latin America. Although he was not a central reference for Dependency theorists, his work was extremely significant for Latin American Marxism first (see, for example, Aricó 2005) and, later, for many Postcolonial and Decolonial thinkers later (crucially for this discussion, Mignolo 2013). In addition, and very importantly, Gramsci's work has often been discussed and compared to Mariátegui's in light of the similarities of a non-orthodox approach to Marxism that takes into account the specificities of the national context (Fernández-Díaz 1991; Portantiero 1991; Mignolo 2013).

(Furtado 1964; Frank 1970; Jaguaribe 1970; Quijano 1977b; Cardoso and Faletto 1979 [1969]).

However, Dependency theorists' analysis suffered from a deep crisis with the arrival of the 1980s. Among the many reasons for this, the fact of naturalising the national contexts and the main focus on economic factors did not satisfy scholars and intellectuals whose main goal was to finally detach Latin American critical theory from Eurocentric elements (in relation to this, see Grosfoguel 2000). As we are going to see, and as a crucial point for this research, the very understanding of 'Latin America' within the global space began to be questioned. Instead of mainly focusing on theories of (failed) economic development, broader questions explored how *modernity* was related to Latin America. Thus, in addition to the socio-economic sphere, this was deeply investigated in the cultural production that contributed to the image of Latin America. By rearticulating the whole history of the Americas since the colonial conquest, this literature explored whether, when, and in what ways Latin America became *modern*. And, as much of the emerging Postcolonial literature was stressing in the anglophone world (see discussion in next section), modernity was indissolubly linked with colonialism.

This theoretical move lead scholars to investigate and put under tensions concepts such as that of the *nation*, exploring the ways in which national identity is embedded in processes of identification with territory and political action (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996). The formation of national identity was perceived as one of the most important elements to achieve in order to be a modern nation, and this is precisely the focus of this research. Being the product of the socio-economic elites ruling the countries, the materialisation of national identity started to be explored in the cultural sphere, exploring, for example, the *hybrid forms* resulting from the complex and longstanding mixture of European and native culture (García Canclini

1995). Scholars from different disciplines joined together with the goal of reflecting on the meaning of Latin American modernity according, for example, to historical, political, philosophical, anthropological and cultural perspectives (Robinson 1989; Brunner 1992; García Canclini 1993; Dussel 1995; Quijano 1995; Lomnitz 2001; Schelling 2001; Miller and Hart 2007). Among the multiple views of Latin American modernity, with the attempt to avoid unidirectional approaches that use the Western/European experience as the unique example, some scholars adopted the concepts of *peripheral modernity* (Sarlo 1988), *alternative modernity* (Kaup 2006), or *trans-modernity* (Dussel 2000). Moreover, scholars reflected upon the role of Latin America in light of postmodern debates, highlighting the rupture of modern narratives and the consequent fragmentation and segmentation of the modern discourse (Beverley, Oviedo and Aronna 1995; Herlinghaus and Walter 2000).

Within these contributions, constant attention was paid to colonialism and the importance of the colonial experience for the understanding of Latin America. Some scholars especially, as will be discussed in detail in this chapter, insisted on exploring questions related to the very *idea* of Latin America (Mignolo 2005). In particular, this signified a more explicit attempt to break the European/Western epistemologies that had normally been adopted, even within much of critical thinking, to investigate Latin America since the colonial conquest. In other words, the overwhelming heritage of colonialism was at the core of the multidisciplinary investigation (Moraña, Dussel and Jáuregui 2008a). It was therefore a matter of uncovering the global geopolitics of knowledge shaped by European colonialism in the Americas (Mignolo 2002; Castro-Gómez 2005), and of *decolonising* the epistemologies used for understanding Latin American space (Lander 2000; Escobar and Mignolo 2013). In such a way, colonialism is both a discourse and practice that has been continuously rearticulated during postcolonial time (Escobar 1995, Coronil 1997, Quijano

2000; Mignolo 2000; Saldívar 2012). This chapter will explore some of the theoretical questions discussed by this critical literature; more specifically, particular attention will be given to how scholars simultaneously rearticulated the questions posed internationally by Postcolonial Studies and those coming internally from the debates outlined above. From a broader perspective, this research aims to uncover and analyse “the plurality of discourses” generated by colonialism (Moraña, Dussel and Jáuregui 2008b: 1) by means of an exploration of their material manifestations across the junctures of Latin American space.

### *Postcolonial Time*

As stressed in the previous section, over the last few decades Postcolonial Studies has focused on the role of colonialism in the understanding of social, cultural, and power relations, in both the former centres and former peripheries. Following this approach, the investigation of central questions such as national identity, history, and modernisation of postcolonial countries, could not be fully understood without considering the bulky legacy of colonialism. As a result, Postcolonial Studies displayed particular interest in the construction of the *nation* in territories characterised by a recent process of independence from a former imperial domination (for example, regarding the Indian context, Guha 1983; Chatterjee 1986, 1993; Goswami 2004). Although Latin America’s colonial history is substantially different from that of other continents, it is interesting to explore how the controversial idea of *time* has been re-conceptualised within some of the most relevant postcolonial works.

Preliminarily, it is central to remark that Latin American countries became formally independent about one and a half centuries prior to the



other world colonies (especially in Africa and Asia), as a result, colonial and postcolonial experiences are significantly diverse. This fact should generate a lively debate – as will be seen in the second part of the chapter – about the pertinence of the postcolonial scholarship in the study of Latin America. Regarding the nation-state, crucially, Latin American countries had to build the nation-state in a relatively early period in comparison to the African and Asian cases (mostly after World War II) in which this kind of political organisation was by then globally hegemonic. Benedict Anderson, in order to note this special condition of Latin American newborn nation-states, efficaciously described them as *creole pioneers* (Anderson 2006 [1983]: 47-66).

Thus, focusing on the discussion about time in postcolonial theory, and remaining within the Indian experience, it is of critical importance to mention the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty who, through an original rereading of Marx's work, challenged the Western/European understanding of time (and, consequently, of history) by stressing the colonial hierarchies inherently embedded in that concept (Chakrabarty 2000). According to Chakrabarty, starting from the post-independence period, postcolonial states found themselves in a world that was temporally divided: European and Western countries had the best combination of social organisation in terms of knowledge, technology, politics, economics, and religion – in other words, they were (in) the *present*; the rest of the world's countries belonged to the *past*, a recent or distant state of “not yet” in relation to progress and emancipation (Chakrabarty 2000: 8-9).

The former colonies, while they defended independence through the establishment of the nation state, conforming to the form of political organisation dominant at that time, immediately faced a *challenge*. Chakrabarty noted: “what kind of a temporal space is signaled by ‘not yet’? If one reads ‘not yet’ as belonging to the historian's lexicon, a historicism follows”, it is “the idea of history as a waiting room, a period that is needed

for the transition to capitalism at any particular time and place”; a “period to which [...] the third world is often consigned” (Chakrabarty 2000: 65). This is a crucial consideration: as we will see shortly, the attempts at modernising Latin American countries seemed precisely to respond to the necessity of leaving that *waiting room* in which they felt trapped since the beginning of their postcolonial period. As we will see in the three cities under scrutiny, this temporal pitfall strongly characterised – although in remarkably different and creative ways – the desires of the elites that led the urban transformation in Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Brasília.

However, following Chakrabarty’s reasoning, this intention to catch-up is in fact misleading as “it is as though the ‘not yet’ is what keeps capital going” (Chakrabarty 2000: 65) and this fact sweeps away any *outside* from the historical narration of the capitalist era.<sup>8</sup> The temporal and spatial coordinates are deeply intertwined with each other; yet, before reflecting upon this powerful relation, it is helpful first to focus first on Chakrabarty’s idea of history. In order to explain the absence of outside, he distinguishes between History 1 and History 2. The former is the “precondition” of capital, basically the “universal and necessary history we associate with capital”; the latter is made of the “antecedents” of capital (Chakrabarty 2000: 63), all those elements that, although seeming something different and therefore external to capital’s history, are actually “constitutive” of it (Chakrabarty 2000: 70).

History 1 tries to discipline and subjugate History 2, even by violence when necessary; however, within this complex and asymmetrical relation, “History 1 is always modified by History 2s” (Chakrabarty 2000: 69) – the plural of the latter term is extremely significant as it indicates the diversity

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<sup>8</sup> There are many theories about when capitalism became global. As will be discussed shortly in more detail, the decolonial scholarship firmly claims that the capitalist system spread internationally with the colonisation of the Americas (for example, Quijano and Wallerstein 1992).

and heterogeneity inherent to the concept. Finally, Chakrabarty does not consider History 2s either “precapitalistic” or “feudal” (Chakrabarty 2000: 67);<sup>9</sup> on the contrary, instead of being marked by a (linear) temporal connotation, their character consists of exemplifying *historical difference(s)* which is, again, internal (and actually constitutive) to global capital.

The relationship between the two Histories is read in this research as one of the dialogical dialectic relationships discussed in the introductory section. On the state level, the perception of disconnection between the two Histories brought Latin America’s ruling elites to act on the temporal basis, that is, they imagined the national projects following the intention to leave the subaltern position they felt trapped in (History 2). At this level of perception, urban transformations are thought of as formidable modernising strategies to leave the waiting room and jump directly into contemporary time (History 1). As stressed by many Dependency theorists in the 1970s (for example, Schteingart 1973, Castells 1977, Quijano 1977), urbanisation in the ‘periphery’ - (History 2(s) - is necessarily related to that in the ‘centre’ - History 1(s) - not only in terms of urban shapes, but also, and more importantly, as a result of political, economic, social, and cultural factors that tie the two areas together. However, differently from Dependency thinkers, I conceive this relationship as dialectic, that is, it is not just a mere hierarchical difference in terms of cause-effect that ties the

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<sup>9</sup> Chakrabarty’s criticism to historicism is also directed at (Western) Marxism in so far as history is seen as a linear development of events/stages going progressively from feudalism, to capitalism, and finally to socialism, therefore implying a sort of stage of *maturity* of social structure and classes. Regarding this point the author recalls (Chakrabarty 2000: 11) Ranajit Guha’s contribution (Guha 1983: 6) which criticised the English Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm for using the concept of ‘prepolitical’ to refer to peasant rebellions in preindustrial societies (Hobsbawm 1959). This negation of any sort of given progression stresses how history cannot be conceived as an overall unity containing within itself different temporalities: something left somehow in the past but, nonetheless, still present. Guha and Chakrabarty stress how such a linear vision of history (historicism) is misleading, not least because it generalises and naturalises the European path, and does not bring a better understanding of historical transformations, in particular of those histories outside Europe.

two urban Histories; although the nature of their relationship is asymmetrical they always generate reciprocal modifications. As will be discussed in the next chapter, this fact is crucial in order to understand 'the urban' as something that, being analysed in its historical configurations and noting its dramatic transformations in the twentieth century, acts far beyond the physical expression of the city (Lefebvre 2003 [1970], Brenner and Schmid 2015). Thus, while this latter problematic of the historical configuration of Latin America's urban geographies will be discussed in the next chapter, it is worth now going back to the question of the centrality of temporal imagination in the transformations here under examination. The historicist idea of time challenged by Chakrabarty was the protagonist, through different modality and meaning, of the three projects of urban renovation.

Buenos Aires, a relatively young colonial city, grew dramatically at the end of the nineteenth century and started unequivocally to play a significant role in the south of the continent. However, when it came to *producing* a national identity, the European *past* became, for many and controversial reasons, the main landmark for that project. More specifically, the *tradition* and *prestige* of France and Paris constituted the symbols around which the elites undertook these plans of urban transformation. Thus, by the second decade of the twentieth century, thanks to the strong similarities with the French capital in terms of urban planning and most symbolic architecture, the Argentine capital was already known as the "Paris of America" (Gutiérrez 2002: 51). Within this space-temporal contradiction, which would spread intense discussions about Buenos Aires's identity on the national and regional scale, Argentina's past was definitely European.

In comparison with Buenos Aires's strong European imagination, the *temporality* of post-revolutionary Mexico City is more articulated. Here the renovation consisted of an original combination of *past* and *present*: both the

precolonial and colonial past participated in the understanding of the present Mexico, which was presented as an extremely rich source of culture and tradition. This was translated into urban forms evoking clearly this multifaceted history. Following the goal of reunifying a country torn by the civil war, the city and (idea of) the nation were renewed by this *mixture* of time which was to some extent innovative in the Latin American context, as the precolonial period was normally excluded from the nation-building processes. Both precolonial and colonial period were recuperated in order to forge a national identity involving all the sectors of population; the adoption of neo-colonial architectural style as well as the frequent reference to the indigenous population in urban representations such as murals articulated a manifold temporality that aimed to define post-revolutionary Mexico.

Finally, profoundly differently from Buenos Aires and Mexico City, Brasília was built in order to launch the country toward the *future*. Through its modernist conception, the new capital city was thought of as a sharp rupture with the past of the country. By borrowing Le Corbusier's futuristic urban conceptions and by explicitly rejecting both precolonial and colonial history, the Brazilian government intended to reorganise social relations as well as the whole identity of Brazil. The project of Brasília responded to the 'necessity' of bringing into *alignment* with Western/European political, economic, and cultural standards – within which the United States started to play a leading role after the end of World War II. This requirement, or desire, was strengthened by debates on 'development' characterising the post-war period; debates that, in the aftermath of decolonisation, were designed, generally by the Western powers, to show the way to the 'Third-World' countries in the renewed global context.

However, these postcolonial transformations are not thought of as linear flows of knowledge going merely from the centres to the peripheries;

on the contrary, the research will focus on the contradictions characterising such problematic changes. In other words, although these temporalities seem to be in line with the classical European/Western discourse, it would probably be mistaken to consider them only as a simple superimposition. Rather, recalling Chakrabarty's reflection, it is more profitable to highlight the *tensions* that connect History 1 to History 2s and the complexity of their dialectical relation. After all, postcolonial time can be considered as something in which, although it is impossible not to recall colonial history, those colonial relations were reshaped through original and somewhat more sophisticated ways that are able to shed light on each country's specific socio-political situation.

Having framed the question in this way, as within other former colonies, in Latin America the 'postcolonial' consisted in facing a constant *negotiation of time* that consisted in a constant struggle oscillating indeterminately between past and present. The temporal differences circulating around the world – which are in the first instance geo-political – contributed to generate a situation in which “the non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space – a *third space* – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences” (Bhabha 1994: 218, emphasis added). Strategically, this third space can be explored by looking at the capital cities' transformations in a way that, metonymically, they are able to offer vivid views of their respective countries. Despite each case giving its own specificities as well as the unrepeatable peculiarity of its context, these cases represent different angles of the same (postcolonial) figure.

The *time* of the postcolonial, as it is clearly defined by Bhabha, “cannot be represented in the binary relation of archaism/modernity, inside/outside, past/present, because these questions block off the forward drive or teleology of modernity. They suggest that what is read as the

'futurity' of the modern, its ineluctable progress, its cultural hierarchies, may be an 'excess', a disturbing alterity, a process of the marginalization of the symbols of modernity" (Bhabha 2004: 245). Modernity is one of the critical concepts around which the Western/European discourse is deployed and, as a result, it is a fundamental target for postcolonial and decolonial critiques. However, modernity does not only mean the beginning of the European domination of the world, namely a temporal coordinate, it also inherently contains its *spatialisation*, that is, the alteration of world geographies triggered by the new colonial geographies<sup>10</sup>. As will be seen shortly in more detail, Europe itself is a *concept* generated by the new configuration of the world resulting from colonialism – as opposition to the *Other* assigned to the colonial space (Said 1978). In this sense, it is possible to understand the historical process of the Eurocentric logic suggested by Chakrabarty, according to which things (history) happen "first in the West, and then elsewhere" (Chakrabarty 2000: 6).

To give an example, as a result of the process of decolonisation in the aftermath of World War II, the world was divided into different geographical areas in which, not without enormous contradictions, even the significance of geographical coordinates suggested this temporal division. This is the case of, for instance, North/South of the planet, Western/Oriental countries, Urban/Rural space, First, Second and Third World. These categories participated in a spatial division of the world and, at the same time, they divided the world into different *temporalities* characterised by a hierarchical division, materialising dichotomies such as modernity/tradition. Moreover, these categories ended up constituting

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<sup>10</sup> While discussing the relationships between geography and colonialism/imperialism, Livingstone states that the former was 'the science of imperialism par excellence' (1993: 60), thanks to the creation of 'new' spaces which were represented – and classified – for the first time by a strong sense of *objectivity*. In so doing, such 'objective' support of science permitted the naturalisation of the colonial domain that was therefore justified and sublimated by the reshaping of global maps and atlases after the era of geographical 'discoveries' (Dussel 1993; Mignolo 2000, 2005).

specific area of research within the field of social sciences and, as a result, of urban studies themselves by the articulation of categories such as, for example, 'Global South' and/or 'Third World' urbanisation, and so forth (see chapter 2).

On the other hand, these temporalities were re-configured in the projects of modernisations. In terms of urban transformations, this was expressed by following what were thought as the most advanced tendencies in relation to urban planning and architecture, a knowledge that was overwhelmingly coming from the Euro-American world. For example, Haussmann's famous plan of renovation of Paris (1853-1870) - defined by the implementation of wide avenues and square cutting the complexity of the city map - constituted at the turn of the twentieth century an important model for the transformation of key cities such as, among others, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Santiago de Chile. Another example occurred with the spread of modernist architecture across Latin America between the 1930s and 1960s, a strong influence that generated radical changes in many country's urban environment, among the most important cases there are those of Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo and, probably as apogee, the construction of Brasília.

Hence, each of the cases here investigated belong to a *different time* in which different conceptions of the city were hegemonic, and each city rearticulated such knowledge in a specific way on the basis of its national context and necessity. In general terms, the cases of Buenos Aires and Brasília are those in which the Euro-American models were reproduced quite strongly and uncritically, whereas in Mexico City the project was significantly more syncretic and original - as a result of the political events that shook Mexico during those years. Having said that, and going back to the Postcolonial question in Latin America, it is necessary to remark on what has been the relationship between Postcolonial Studies and Latin



America and, more specifically, see the modalities through which the Americas first, and then Latin America, were inserted onto the global map.

### *Decolonial Studies: A Postcolonial Approach to Latin America*

It is not easy to find a 'postcolonial moment' in relation to Latin America, in the sense of a period in which Postcolonial Studies worked extensively on Latin America. During the first two decades starting from the 1970s, the development of postcolonial scholarship was clearly situated in the Anglophone world and its studies were overwhelmingly concentrated on British and French colonialism. Latin America, due to historical and cultural (that is, colonial) differences was very rarely actively part of that theoretical reconfiguration of the world that considered colonialism as an unavoidable starting point for analysis. However, from the 1990s things began to change and, in its specific way, Latin America was crossed by the postcolonial approach. As suggested by Fernando Coronil, there is not a set of studies that could be clearly classified as 'postcolonial' in Latin America (Coronil 2004: 221). The most relevant example in this sense was that of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group (LASSG) which, in the 1990s, sought to build up a critical reading of Latin America by following the inspiring example of the SSG. The work of the group lasted only a few years (a significant collection of works in English is provided by Rodríguez [2001]) and the goal to create a multidisciplinary and long-term investigation failed relatively quickly. The majority of the members of the group were literary critics, whose main purpose was to investigate the subaltern through the analysing of texts produced by subaltern subjects.

Although this experience represented the desire to refresh the investigation by introducing critical theories that provided original and compelling interpretations of the former colonial world, the composition of

the group, as well as the lack of a clear and systematic collective program of historical investigation, generated a scholarship which “privileged the interpretation of texts over the analysis of historical transformations” (Coronil 2004: 231), therefore failing to achieve a drastic renovation of historiographical work. A more severe criticism came from Ramon Grosfoguel, an important figure of Decolonial Studies, who blamed LASSG’s work for reproducing the “epistemic schema of Area Studies in the United States” and, as a result, “theory was still located in the North while the subjects to be studied are located in the South” (Grosfoguel 2011: 2). The last public event led by the group took place at Duke University in 1998.

However, the experience of Postcolonial Studies in Latin America was undoubtedly important for at least two reasons. First, it represented the will to enhance the postcolonial experience beyond the Anglo-Saxon world, trying to place Latin America *within* a world history which cannot be fully understood without considering the global influence of modern colonialism. This attempt cannot be overlooked. If Latin America was considered as something somehow special which needed a precise field of investigation (for instance, the publications considered as ‘postcolonial’, very rarely contained works on Latin America [Coronil 2004: 225-229]), LASSG’s experience tried to insert the continent into a more global understanding of the postcolonial world. Second, despite this group not achieving its goals, from its ashes would be born the decolonial group, one of the most original approaches in the critical study of the continent. This group was composed of scholars coming from diverse disciplines (such as semiotics, sociology, and anthropology) and some of its components, such as one of the most important figures, Walter Mignolo, were part of LASSG. In the late 1990s, this group of Latin American intellectuals, mostly based in US universities (among others, Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, Aníbal Quijano, Arturo Escobar, and Fernando Coronil), tried to radically renew

the understanding of the Americas by reframing the historical narrative (therefore shifting the epistemic schema) as well as by introducing new conceptual tools.

Challenging the traditional scholarship, decolonial thinkers claim that the modern epoch starts precisely with the 'discovery' of America (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992; Dussel 1995; Mignolo 2000). This idea of discovering a new continent was first called into question by the Mexican Edmundo O'Gorman, who opposed to discovery the *invention* (O'Gorman 1972), in order to stress the colonial and Western/Eurocentric point of view by which American history has been written and thought since its colonisation. Starting from this perspective, Dussel goes into the myth of modernity and sharply underlines the constitutive Eurocentric approach by which that concept was set up (Dussel 1995). In particular, he insisted on the point that, by the discovery and conquest of the Americas, and the relative 'discovery' of the Atlantic as an alternative commercial route, Europe imagined itself as central within the 'world-system' (in the sense of Wallerstein 1974; 1980; 1989) in which all other territories are conceived as peripheral (Dussel 1995: 15), and Amerindia is obviously part of such 'new' global peripheries. In so doing, *time* (the 'advent' of modernity) was profoundly spatialised, and this gave birth to the paradoxical idea of a global history that includes the coexistence of different epochs at the same time, but in different places.

As well as for postcolonial thinkers, the attempt to *denaturalise* modernity is crucial in decolonial discourses. The philosopher Enrique Dussel, one of the prominent figures of the decolonial experience, aims to uncover the instauration of *spatial visualisations* of modernity itself, which are typical of the Western narrative: "Modernity appears when Europe affirms itself as the 'centre' of a *World History* that it inaugurates; the 'periphery' that surrounds this centre is consequently part of its self-definition" (Dussel 1993: 65). After all, this spatialisation of time, as Dussel

notes, was included in Hegel's conception of universal history as a movement from the East to the West, which has Europe as its final apogee (Dussel 1993: 69). Another fundamental question within the debate of modernity is concerned with its actual *beginning*. The novelty is that, according to decolonial scholarship, the conquest of America constituted the very *necessity* for modernity, in other words, only the new geographical configuration of the world made possible the political, philosophical, and cultural narration of modernity. That is to say that "there could not have been a capitalist world economy without the Americas" (Quijano & Wallerstein 1992: 449) and, therefore, "1492 is the date of the 'birth' of modernity" (Dussel 1993: 474). This epistemic move reshapes the understanding of global history as a whole.

If the Americas were the *constitutive act* for global history, their geographical/political importance seems to be far more significant than the traditional state of global periphery that it is usually associated with this *concept*. The body of the decolonial scholarship spreads from this critical question and challenges the ways in which the continents have been historically conceptualised. This implies also a strong critique of what is conceived of as 'Latin American Studies', which is usually separated from 'American Studies', assuming implicitly a sort of radical difference in the study (and conception) of the two continents, as if they belonged to a diverse history. Thus, the main question is: what are the Americas?

First of all, it is worth observing the significance of the 'new' geography for the coloniser's imagination. As a reflex of the colonial enterprise, the European powers reshaped their very understanding of the world: "the discovery and conquest of America is fundamentally the discovery and making of 'Europe'" (Coronil 1996: 61). Additionally, "after America and Europe were established, Africa, Asia, and eventually Oceania

followed suit" (Quijano 2000: 540)<sup>11</sup>. Thus, thanks to the geographical discoveries and their subsequent colonisation, Europe began to *imagine* itself as the *core* of a world that had just become global (Mignolo 1995: 264). This transformation involved also the circulation of goods worldwide, the old commercial routes were displaced in favour of the new 'shape' of the planet and the 'discovery' of new resources (for instance, the history of Buenos Aires is closely related to these geographical changes). Colonial Europe emerged as a global power, "a historically new region was constituted as a new geo-cultural id-entity: Europe – or more specifically, Western Europe. A new geo-cultural identity emerged as the central site for the control of the world market. The hegemony of the coasts of the Mediterranean and the Iberian Peninsula was displaced toward the northwest Atlantic coast in the same historical moment" (Quijano 2000: 537). Following this perspective, it is therefore possible to say that Europe would not have existed, in the *form* in which it is traditionally understood, without the conquest of the Americas, since "Europe could constitute itself as a unified ego exploring, conquering, colonizing an alterity that gave back its image of itself" (Dussel 1993: 66). The world map emerging from the sixteenth century geographical discoveries *fully* reshaped the Western imagination of the world, which conceived its own space (Europe) as *modern*.

Geography, and especially in the peculiar form of cartography, did an important work in placing the new lands under the European dominion. Not only did the cartographical activity consist of an irreplaceable tool in order to reach, conquer, and control the colonial territories; also, and perhaps much more importantly, mapping had an extremely significant role in shaping the way in which the Americas were *conceptualised*. After all,

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<sup>11</sup> Regarding Africa and its *invention*, it is important to mention the groundbreaking work of Valentin-Yves Mudimbe (1988).

geographers have recognised how mapping is not just a 'simple' way to replicate the world on a sheet of paper, but that it in fact contributes to *mould* the world itself (Wood 1992; Farinelli 2009). Thus, the 'beginning' of the Americas can be thought of as "the primitive accumulation of modern cartography" which, thanks to the propagation of new lines and borders, organised and naturalised the new hierarchies defying the modern world (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 30-37).

Thus, the first task that the European colonisers had to carry out after their landing in the Americas, was to *put the Americas on the map* (Mignolo 1995: 259-313). In addition to merely describing and dividing the 'new' planetary map, mapping represented a critical tool for the imagination of the new world and, especially, for its new *hierarchies*. As Mignolo critically pointed out, the European geographical understanding of the world until the discovery/invention of the Americas consisted of three continents, and starting from 1492 a fourth continent was added. This fact implied not only a change in the physical perception of the planet, it also started to be represented as a different stage of (under)development within the population of the planet. It is perhaps possible to say that the new geographical 'discovery' entailed a further spatial differentiation of the various stages of human progress. Obviously, this was a vision of the world totally based on the experience of Europe which, by taking itself as the example of the most modern expression of population, classified the rest of the world through sharp hierarchies. In terms of geographical maps, Europe not only began to represent itself on their top – stressing its superiority – but also the continents were often surrounded by drawings in which the Americas and Africa were usually associated with monsters, cannibals, or naked savages (Mignolo 1995: 278) and Europe and Asia with well-dressed women (Mignolo 1995: 273).

Additionally, naming was another fundamental part the colonisation of the 'new' world. After all, being new implies the absence of history. As Mignolo noted, "what is really confusing in this story is that once America was named as such in the sixteenth century and Latin America named as such in the nineteenth, it appeared as if they had been there forever" (Mignolo 2005: 2). The European coloniser ignored – and often destroyed – the indigenous millennial knowledge and reshaped those 'new' lands building on its exclusive (colonial) imagination. Therefore, "economic expansion, technology, and power, rather than truth, is what characterized European cartography early on, as well as the national cartography of the Americas at a later date" (Mignolo 1995: 281). In this sense, while geography had a critical role during colonialism, contemporary debates in the British academic environment are particularly engaged in moving towards an actual decolonisation of geography as a discipline (Jazeel 2017a; Legg 2017; Radcliffe 2017). More precisely, Stephen Legg speaks about *decolonialism* instead of decolonisation, in the sense of an "endless process" whereby "geography will necessarily transform itself" (Legg 2017: 347). This approach underscores the need for a constant effort in rethinking concepts and the epistemologies from which they emerge, rather than a 'mere' and limited task of extraction of (post)colonial elements within (the production of) geographical knowledge. In more general terms, as Sarah Radcliffe notes,

"the 'decolonial turn' builds on and extends postcolonial, feminist and critical race geography by centring the forms of knowledge production under colonial-modernity, in order to refine understandings of its particularities and to reanimate critiques of racialisation, colonial-modern resource distributions and epistemic violence" (Radcliffe 2017: 330-331).

Hence, if geography was one of the important tools underpinning the shaping of the modern world, the whole dimension of knowledge was actually invaded by, and invaded at the same time, the colonialist view.

### ***Power, Knowledge, Coloniality***

As discussed in the previous sections, the combination of concepts about time, history, and modernity materialised in spatial forms – through geographical and cartographical representations – that naturalised the asymmetrical relationships defining colonialism. However, in order to organise a more detailed conception of the colonial action, it is worth insisting on this complex the articulation of power and knowledge through which they seem mutually to fuel each other.

Geography as *science* was a fundamental field that epitomised the *geopolitics of knowledge* (Castro-Gómez 2005: 239) characterising colonialism. The disproportionate power relations by which the colonial forces could almost entirely *erase* the ‘local’ knowledge largely remained embedded in the organisation and consolidation of the newborn nation states in the post-independence period. On a broader perspective, this operation can be thought of as a part of the epistemological shift which led to *modern science* and which took place mostly in the aftermath of the discovery/conquest of the Americas. The Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez stressed how the period between 1492 and 1700 represented a turning point for Western/European science (Castro-Gómez 2007: 79-92). Paying particular attention to the importance of Descartes for this epochal change, Castro-Gómez stresses how, starting from that period, scientific work started to be perceived as valid only when the subject was clearly separated from the object of study, and such “distance” served to show the “objectivity” of the



research (Castro-Gómez 2007: 82). In other words, the most important thing in order to establish the credibility of the process was that the observer had to place themselves in “*an unnoticed point of observation*” (Castro-Gómez 2007: 82) and accordingly all the results would be indisputable.

This scientific method was imposed throughout the colonial world and became the only ‘objective’ way to conceive science and knowledge – geography is a notable example – contributing to the disdain for other kinds of knowledge which outlived the colonial conquest. Castro-Gómez calls this point of view the *Hubris of the Zero-Point*, highlighting the arrogant impertinence (the hubris) defining such point of view (the incomparability of the zero), stating that this is “the great sin of the West: pretending to be a point of view above any other” (Castro-Gómez 2007: 83) which is even, and paradoxically, placed in an invisible position. This was the cultural environment within which the Americas were created.

Insisting on the meaning of modernity, it seems inevitably to bring an ‘ambiguous’ duplicity: on the one hand, there is the material idea of emancipation and development processed by the use of reason and rationality; on the other, it contains the justification for exerting domination and violence in the name of this positivist itinerary (Dussel 1995: 136). Furthermore, another crucial point is that by the conquest of the Americas, capitalism rose in a *global dimension*: the finding of the ‘new’ territories for Europe signified the possibility of ruling the world through an unprecedented organisation and hierarchisation of people and goods: as a result, it is conceived as constitutive of the link between modernity and capitalism (Mignolo 2005; Quijano and Wallerstein 1992). Earlier, the importance of the appropriation of the Americas was considered crucial for the ascent of capitalism by many thinkers starting from Marx himself, who saw these imperial conquests as fundamental to the passage towards the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1990 [1867]: 915-918); a watershed

which entailed European and Western hegemony for centuries: “it was New World colonialism and slavery that catapulted capitalism into the global industrial system that it subsequently became” (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015: 168). As was noted before, the constitutive connection between capitalism and modernity was stressed by Chakrabarty, as well as in general by other postcolonial thinkers; what changes here is the role of the Americas.

Lastly, but equally important, there is another element that decolonial thinkers see as constitutive of the new global order created as a consequence of the geographical discoveries, that is ‘coloniality’. Coloniality is not synonymous with colonialism, or more precisely, its meaning goes beyond the formal territorial domination which the latter usually indicates. Coloniality, instead, sets out the ‘matrix of power’ (Mignolo 2011) which marks the social organisation of both the colonial and postcolonial world. The concept was initially conceived by Aníbal Quijano (Quijano 1992) and is more accurately described by the expression “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2000, 2007). It consists of classifying on a racial ethnic basis all the world’s population, therefore constituting a hierarchical division of all human activity, from individual everyday life to wide social dimensions such as the division of labour. Such a matrix of power started from the colonisation and the constitution of the Americas and, through the consequent internationalisation of capitalist power, spread all over the world (Quijano 2007: 93-94).

In line with this perspective, *coloniality* indicates not only the clear colonial derivation of modernity but also stresses the peculiar modality by which all modern enterprise has been systematically and successfully carried out. Modernity is therefore indissolubly tied from its very beginning with both capitalism and coloniality. This articulation of power not only outlived the end of colonialism but, contrary to what the traditional

historical narratives tend to portray, and owing to the complex and efficient machine of the nation-state, even strengthened its structure of domination, leaving consequently at large the enormous question of decolonisation (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007).

In the pioneering article *Americanity as a Concept*, Quijano and Wallerstein claim that “the Americas as a geosocial construct were born in the long sixteenth century” (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992: 449). As a sort of starting point of the decolonial work, the article frames the ‘birth’ of the Americas in (mutual) correspondence with the ‘beginning’ of global capitalism in a way in which, again, the discovery of the new continents triggered its spatial expansion, and, as a consequence, the very possibilities for its quantitative development. According to the authors, this global transformation was principally due to two reasons: first, the Americas brought literally “the space” that allowed the capitalist system to be global; second, the conquest offered the opportunity to experiment within the American territories – and then globalise – “variegated methods of labour control” (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992: 449). The latter element was significantly facilitated by the fact that, contrary to many ‘peripheral’ places such as South and West Europe, the indigenous population was not able to counterpose a significant resistance, except in the cases of Mexico and the Andes, and the coloniser could therefore destroy or enslave the natives and build social institutions which were totally new, namely without the necessity of taking into consideration (negotiating with) the precolonial ones. In this sense, it was literally the production of a new world. And through this perspective, that is to say considering the unique features that characterised the conquest beyond the Atlantic, the concept of ‘Americanity’ has to be understood. In other words, challenging the hegemonic European and Eurocentric discourse, “Americanity has always been, and remains to this day, an essential element in what we mean by ‘modernity’” (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992: 449).

The hierarchical division of people, which corresponded to a precise division of labour as well as to well-defined modalities of command,<sup>12</sup> was constitutive for the birth of the new world system. In addition to coloniality, “ethnicity” and “racism” contributed to the instauration of the new hierarchies.<sup>13</sup> This profound and violent segmentation of the labour power, which included harsh and often brutal forms of control, was what the capitalist system needed – it was essential – in order to become finally global. Thus, if on the one hand the Americas seem to belong to a temporally (socio-economically) faraway time, this sort of ‘remoteness’ was in fact *necessary* for a quantitative as well as qualitative transformation of the world. Thinking about the centuries following the conquest, it would seem very hard to conceive watershed events in world history such as the Industrial Revolution (which, both in the short and long term, strengthened enormously the European/Western hegemony) without the resources ‘offered’ by the Americas (Hobsbawm 1999). Therefore, it is very important to *de-provincialise* American history(ies) (the history of ‘both’ the Americas, as we will see in the next section, although North America managed to achieve this goal, and did so also at the expenses of the other [Latin America] and made it a central location in the emergence of the world history. To go back to Chakrabarty’s discourse, the history of the Americas

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<sup>12</sup> “Ethnicity was the inevitable cultural consequence of coloniality. [...] it justified the multiple forms of labour control, invented as part of Americanness: slavery for the Black Africans, various forms of coerced cash-crop labour (*repartimiento*, *mita*, peonage) for Native Americans, indentured labour (*engagé*) for the European working class. [...] As we came into the post-independence period, the forms of labour control and the names of the ethnic categories were updated. But an ethnic hierarchy remained.” (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992: 550-441)

<sup>13</sup> Coloniality, ethnicity, and racism belonged to *both* the Americas (the contradictions involving the traditional dual division of the Americas will be discussed shortly). Thus, despite the fact that the *two* Americas took extremely different economic and political paths, as will be seen more in detail thereafter, those traits of Americanness have continued to mark significantly their society. Still in the twentieth century, “it was no accident that core-periphery analysis was propelled onto the world intellectual scene by the Economic Commission for Latin America. It was no accident anti-racist political mobilization received its earliest and greatest impulse in North America” (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992: 552).

seems to convincingly correspond to the constellation of History 2s that constitutively articulate the operation of global capitalism. This occurred despite the fact that the social relations within the Americas in colonial times were normally far from corresponding to the typical capitalist ones<sup>14</sup> – there was a lack, for example, of an extended system of wages – however, they played an absolutely central role in the instauration of the world economy as a whole.

Finally, is it possible to consider Decolonial Studies as merely the Latin American interpretation of Postcolonial Studies? Before trying to answer this question, it is worth going a step back in this genealogy and considering the important contribution made by the scholars belonging to the Dependency Theory school. In the 1960s and 1970s, Latin America challenged both development theories and orthodox Marxism (both theorising, from different perspectives, a linear succession of stages characterising national development) by claiming that the ‘backwardness’ associated with Latin American countries was not due to a lack of social and political structures but, on the contrary, it was the result of the relationship of *dependency* with the ‘developed’ world. In other words, the ‘development’ of the Western world was the cause of the ‘underdevelopment’ of its peripheries. This model centre/periphery innovated the Marxist understanding of Latin America as well as of what was more generally suggested to be the ‘Third World’, by sweeping away the idea that these countries could have experienced radical improvements

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<sup>14</sup> This global configuration of labour and its profound but somehow *synchronised* asymmetries is clearly summarised by Quijano: “Europe also became, until the nineteenth century and virtually until the worldwide crisis of 1870, the central site of the process of the commodification of the labor force, while all the rest of the regions and populations colonized and incorporated into the new world market under European dominion basically remained under nonwaged relations of labor. And in non-European regions, wage labor was concentrated almost exclusively among whites. Of course, the entire production of such a division of labor was articulated in a chain of transference of value and profits whose control corresponded to Western Europe” (Quijano 2000: 538).

without a change in the configuration of the world-system<sup>15</sup> (Furtado 1964; Frank 1970; Quijano 1977; Cardoso and Faletto 1979 [1969]). The succession of critical thought in Latin America seems to be clear and even coherent. It is possible to see the strong attention and interest in concepts such as, just to give a prominent example, geography, which has been constantly inquired in relation to topical questions like colonialism, (unequal) development, and modernity. Additionally, thinkers such as Quijano and Mignolo have been important figures of these schools, stressing a long and constant research which probably could not be fully understood without considering the transformations that have occurred over the decades.

Having said that, the recent debate is dominated by the Decolonial thinkers, who focused on their epistemological rupture with the previous scholarship. Some of the discrepancies are clearly evident; as Mignolo remarked, “while the postcolonial has the Enlightenment as its point of reference, the decolonial has the Renaissance”, that is to say that “most postcolonial theorists come from the legacies of British and French imperialism and start in the 18th century and, as the ‘post’ indicates, their theories start and depart from French post-structuralism” (Mignolo 2012). A similar attempt to demarcate the significant distance from postcolonialism is put forward by Ramón Grosfoguel, who stressed the “epistemic privilege” that decolonial authors give to the South, in contrast to the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group’s preference for “Eurocentric thinkers” such as Foucault, Derrida and Gramsci (Grosfoguel 2011: 3). Again, these insights show the importance given to the combinations of space and time. In particular, the spatial question is carefully taken into account when it comes to thinking of the *loci of enunciation*. Namely, it is fundamental to consider the intellectual –

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<sup>15</sup> An interesting overview of the internal differences among Dependency theorists is offered by Grosfoguel [2000].

epistemological – framework from which the narrative is produced and, consequently, the following attempt to move this – colonial and Eurocentric – point of view to create a concrete possibility of *decolonisation* (for example, Mignolo 2010). However, in the light of the succession of people and ideas which have now been discussed, it seems quite misleading to consider the Decolonial experience as something *beyond* the Latin American, and to some extent Western, tradition of critical thought.

After all, it is not easy to sharply separate Decolonial and Postcolonial approaches. For example, according to Bhabra, “both postcolonialism and decoloniality are developments within the broader politics of knowledge production and both emerge out of political developments contesting the colonial world order established by European empires, albeit in relation to different time periods and different geographical orientations” (Bhabra 2014: 119). It would be also hard to consider Decolonial Studies as something totally separated from other schools of critical thought; despite the innovative and original elements, there are evident connections not only with the postcolonial experience, but also with Dependency Theory (for example, the work of Aníbal Quijano seems continuously to reformulate questions concerning both the conceptualization and material production of Latin American space) as well as with the ‘European’ Frankfurt school (in relation to its “critical social theory tradition” [Bhabra 2014: 115]). It seems thus infertile, and perhaps unrealistic, to position the decolonial scholarship in a sort of still unknown place located beyond the West; on the contrary, it is in fact more productive to consider its original contribution within a larger genealogy that has tried to uncover, and possibly break, the power relations characterizing the capitalist era. Thus, on the one hand, this study considers both Decolonial Studies and the intellectual landscape from which they emerged (which seems to own implicitly its intense critical energy); and on the other, as will be shown in the next chapter, it refers to these critical approaches in order

to analyse the urban environment, therefore trying to offer an original and efficient approach to the study of urbanisation. However, after having discussed the postcolonial/decolonial approach in the study and conceptualisation of the Americas, it is now worth considering in more detail the geo-historical process that made one part of the Americas, starting from a certain point, be classified as 'Latin'.

### *Land, Cities, and Race: the Concept of 'Latin' America*

This last section of the chapter explores the 'emergence' of Latin America as a coherent and well-defined area of the Americas. This was the result of geo-political projects that initially had as protagonists the European powers but, quite rapidly, were replaced by the United States' imperial desires. Firstly, colonialism shaped Latin American territories in terms of population and structures of power in a way in which, depending on the specificity of each country, left deep social questions that were still at stake in the periods of the three cases under analysis. The concept of Latin America is something that was produced as something *in opposition* to the rest of the (Northern) Americas. Overall, alongside contradictory narratives placed with the dialectic between rural and urban, the racial question played a crucial role in the postcolonial definition of that portion of the Americas.

As a result of the arrival of the European, the two Americas were soon defined by *colonial differences*. There was 'Anglo' America, the Northern part, in which Britain played a major role, and (what would become) 'Latin' America, all the southern territories – the Rio Grande river was normally considered the 'natural' border – that were subjected to the Iberic empires (the Spanish and Portuguese). Nonetheless, this difference did not only indicate the identity (culture, language, and so on) forcefully



imposed by the coloniser, but very importantly it consisted in the specific ways through which the imperial powers organised the colonial society.

With regard to the Anglo-Saxon side of the hemisphere<sup>16</sup> the indigenous population, when not exterminated as normally happened, was systematically kept out of the colonial society and usually displaced to the Western territories, not yet under the systematic control of the Europeans. Then, especially in the case of the United States, which would become of crucial importance, insofar as the colonisation proceeded towards the West, the natives were assigned specific areas characterised by different legislation as well as factual isolation from the rest of the national society. On the other hand, “colonial/racial relations existed only between whites and blacks” as Africans, and African descendants, were a central part of the country’s economy (Quijano 2000: 560). Therefore, when it came to the consolidation of the nation state, namely from the second half of the nineteenth century, huge flows of European migrants reinforced dramatically the ‘whiteness’ of the population; this, in addition to the United States’ further expansion towards West and South (especially via the 1846-48 Mexican-American war), meant a substantial equal opportunity for the white population to relatively easily access a decent amount of land, that is to say, “a basic resource of production” (Quijano 2000: 560).

As far as Latin America is concerned, it is immediately necessary to say that it is not easy to think of that part of the Americas as a homogeneous space. In accounting this diversity, it is important to consider the role of pre-colonial geographies. Contrary to their Northern neighbours, and with the

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<sup>16</sup> North America’s colonial geography was quite unstable up until the mid-nineteenth century; during that period, internal borders were changing fairly quickly as the countries participating in the colonial adventure, as well as the United States, that would become hegemonic in the area, were frequently attempting to expand their power. Here, ‘the Anglo-Saxon side of the hemisphere’ is meant to indicate the territories of today’s United States and Canada, whose socio-cultural history can largely be interpreted along the lines of the British/ Anglo-Saxon/ American (United States’) hegemony.

important exception of the Southern Cone (today's Argentina, Chile and Uruguay), the indigenous population took usually part in colonial societies. This situation would create various and original attempts to rehabilitate the pre-colonial history and culture during the nation-state epoch; this was one of the main features, for example, in the reinvention of Mexico's national identity under analysis in this study.

Having said that, according to Quijano, and this is the most important point I want to stress, another crucial discontinuity with 'Anglo' America was that no distribution of land was carried out throughout Latin America, not even after independence (Quijano 2000). The individual property of massive amounts of land remained the normal condition at least up until the mid-twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> The 'agrarian question', thus, would famously and painfully become one of the most burning issues within Latin America's postcolonial politics. Usually, the pursuance of policies concerning a more equal distribution of land, both in its radical and reformist conceptions, have been translated and claimed nationally as 'agrarian reform'. However, since the turn of the twentieth century this conflicting agrarian condition would often be resolved in its very negation: as a sort of paradox, the re-articulation of national identities tended to be produced through rhetorics which were predominantly focused on the overwhelming pervasiveness of the 'urban'. This was the manifestation of the *urban enigma*.

The strong inequality in land distribution was working alongside and within coloniality in the shaping of the continent. Coloniality, above all, meant *race*. Here again, different areas of Latin America had different

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<sup>17</sup> According to Sokoloff and Stanley, the question of the unequal distribution of land, as well as other elements such as the rise of specific institutional frameworks, is considered as one of the main reasons for the radically different "paths of development" that have been characterising the *two* Americas over the last two centuries (Sokoloff and Stanley 2000).

approaches in organising their postcolonial society. The Southern Cone thought of European migration as a strategic option in order to 'modernise' the country; within this part of the continent, as mentioned above, the indigenous population was substantially emarginated. This was the case, for example, of Argentina at the turn of the twentieth century. When the process of state building was completed through the general extermination of the natives in the South (General Roca's famous 'Conquest of the Desert' in the 1870s), Buenos Aires, which led and centralised around itself the national project, had been populated by hundreds of thousands of European migrants, following an ideology that was highly concerned with the 'whitening' of its population.

In the rest of Latin America, leaving aside Brazil for now, indigenous populations or black African descendants (in the Caribbean areas) constituted an overwhelming portion of society. However, they were normally far from being influential in the making of political life, therefore constituting a sort of *outside* inside the society they lived in. Among the most significant events that tried to break this internal colonial relationship, there are at least the Haitian revolution (1791-1904, still in colonial time)<sup>18</sup> and the Mexican revolution (1910-1920). In particular, this study will investigate post-revolutionary Mexico when questions such as Mexican racial identity and the condition of the peasantry would inevitably take part in the political

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<sup>18</sup> This slave revolution brought the country to independence. Interestingly enough, "Haiti comes into the historical narrative of Latin America especially because of its importance as a sugar-producing colony of Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth century, as well as", probably much more significantly, "the resounding message sent to other slave societies by its independence process, following an uprising of the slave majority and Haiti's establishment of the second independent nation in the Western Hemisphere, after the United States of North America" (Holloway 2011: 5). However, there are different opinions about the actual results of the Haitian revolution as well as those of other famous uprisings. As Mignolo noted, "In the hypothetical case that Túpac Amaru had come to power [referring to a rebellion in colonial Peru], most likely there wouldn't be a "Latin" America today. The Haitian Revolution offered also the possibility of an epistemic delinking but instead was reduced to silence" (Mignolo 2005: 86).

agenda, trying to finding a sort of compromise between the revolutionary subjects and the elites in power. More specifically, this research will explore how these narratives were materialised into Mexico City's urban transformations.

In Brazil, segregation and inequality constituted perhaps one of the most drastic cases, in which "blacks were slaves and Indians from the Amazon were foreigners to the new state" (Quijano 2000: 564). Things did not change with independence, and Brazilian cities would become famous for the urban reconfiguration of these (post)colonial asymmetries. This illuminates how the left-wing Kubitschek presidency attempted to break with this 'tradition' of inequality through the construction of a new capital city. Here again the city, and by extension urban life, is thought of as a powerful symbol, as well as a strategic place, from which to elaborate the project of national modernisation. Therefore, following this perspective, if on the one hand colonialism and coloniality were the most important tools in the shaping of the Americas on the new world map, subsequently, when it came to the post-independence period, these relationships were reconfigured on a national scale in a way that has been efficaciously described as *internal colonialism*, that is, a (re)organisation of power that works primarily through racial and cultural criteria (Casanova 1965; Stone 1979; Gutiérrez 2004). In addition, as defined by Pablo Gonzales Casanova, internal colonialism normally took the shape of a "dominant centre" or "Metropolis" organising the national space (Casanova 1965: 35), therefore reinforcing the power geographies that demarcated the colonial era, that is, a strong power organised around few but crucial urban centres (see chapter 2). In so doing, "the new nations preserve, above all, the *dichotomous character* and contradictory types of relations similar to those found in colonial society" (Casanova 1965: 32, emphasis added) and, to a great extent, they deepened the questions related to an actual decolonisation.

At the same time however, in order to see what I earlier called the *emergence* of Latin America as a coherent area on the global scene, it is necessary to look at the international geo-political processes. In strictly terminological terms, the idea of 'Latin' America was first proposed by France in the 1850s, during Napoleon III's imperial project, in order to revendicate the continent's cultural affinity to Southern Europe and therefore legitimise imminent colonial endeavours, especially in Mexico. The first objective was to defy the progressive expansion and consolidation of the British and North American hegemony over the former Iberian colonies in the new world. The term was proposed by the French intellectual Michel Chevalier, who theorised the "Latin Race" in opposition to the "Anglo-Saxon" one (McGuinness 2003; Holloway 2011). It seems thus inevitable to consider the fact that "the emergence of 'Latinidad' and of 'Latin' America, then, is to be understood in relation to a European history of growing imperialism grounded in a capitalist economy and the desire to determine the shape of 'emancipation' in the non-European world" (Mignolo 2005: 57). Clearly 'Latin' is a racial definition that defined the postcolonial condition of the 'other' America.

There is a sort of double direction in the process of racialisation in the Americas. If Latin America was produced from *outside*, initially from Europe, yet internal colonialism reproduced this racial classification from within the continent: internally, 'Latinidad', as a sign of proximity to Europe, assumed in fact a 'positive' value which was reified into a dominant position. It seems evident from the 'beginning' that this action resulted in the creation of a contradictory postcolonial subject, the Creole/Mestizo. As a sort of "double-edged sword", this action generated "the idea of a new (and fifth) continental unit (a fifth side to the continental tetragon that had been in place in the sixteenth century)" and, at the same time, internally, "lifted up the population of European descent and erased the Indian and the Afro populations" (Mignolo 2005: 59). It is worth

exploring carefully this duality, which lies at the core of the production of Latin America.

From the mid-nineteenth century another power attempted, this time successfully, to play a primary role throughout Latin America. The United States started to put into practice the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, which stated the United States' intention to defend its southern territories from any further European aggression (most of the colonies were in the aftermath of independence), therefore manifesting the strong desire to exert an undisputed control over the whole area. The first part of the project resulted in the westward expansion of the nation-state and the consequent invasion of Mexican lands, a war which lasted from 1846 to 1848 and left in US hands almost one third of the Mexican territories.

The beginning of this aggressive politics was coupled with the *spatial racialisation* of the population, inside and outside the nation itself (De Genova 2005: 95-113). People and territories (the America at the south of the expanded state) were racialized; 'whiteness' was the highest social value in the emerging power and other races were moved into a subaltern position in the hierarchical map of the Americas: 'Latin' America began to be *naturally* perceived as "something else" in relation to the United States (De Genova 2005: 101), which thought of themselves as 'America' (here, as well as in the concept of 'whiteness', there seems to be a sort of *purity* at stake). When the United States defeated Spain in Cuba in 1898 and officially began the imperial adventure that would characterise the country's history throughout the twentieth century, "'Latin' America became darker and darker", thanks to "the increasing discourse of White supremacy" which was boosted in the last decade of the 1890s and "Latin" America began to be perceived more and more as 'Mestizo/a; that is, darker skinned' (Mignolo 2005: 90). Eventually, when the world assisted in the process of decolonisation after the second world war, "Latin America became part of

the [coming] Third World” (Mignolo 2005: 90). In the second part of the twentieth century, the danger for the preservation of that ‘hegemonic whiteness’ (De Genova 2005: 102) came no longer from natives or African descendants, but from new waves of migrants coming mostly from Latin America (‘Latinos’) and Asia (Quijano 2000: 561). Albeit exposed very briefly here, the modality through which *Americanity* worked in Anglo-America deeply contributed to the imagination of Latin America as something ‘natural’ and inherently subaltern within the American landscape. Analytically, this combination of *Americanity* and *(post)coloniality* is what is very specific to the Americas and is able to offer innovative tools for their critical study. Therefore, it is important to investigate ‘Latin America’ considering the processes that made it possible to conceptualise those heterogenous areas as something that was not properly America and that, therefore, needed a racial adjective in order to be defined and classified. All these questions, although shaped differently depending on the case, were clearly at stake in the projects of urban transformation here under analysis.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter aimed to provide a critical understanding of Latin America that will allow the framing of the conversation within a hopefully more defined and less conventional epistemology underpinning this work of historical geography. More precisely, instead of considering the critical scholarship discussed as closed and separated from other intellectual traditions, I attempted to create a theoretical grid that is open to other contributions and that wants to be constantly in dialogue with other approaches, that is, that borrows and bends concepts in order to adapt the theoretical framework to the specific case(s) of analysis. This means that the

context of study, namely the historical and geographical articulation, has priority over a theory that needs to continuously test itself and transform accordingly. This discussion will be resumed in the following chapter while debating some crucial theoretical questions within the discipline of urban studies.

In the case of Latin America, on the one hand Postcolonial Studies offered helpful tools that allow us to rethink its history as not something subaltern to other histories but actually necessary for the (colonial and imperial) 'realisation' of Western history, that is, what Chakrabarty called History 1. This, in addition to the contributions of Decolonial Studies, managed finally to de-provincialise the whole of American history by considering 1492 as the starting point of the modern/capitalist world, therefore giving the Americas a different, and much more important, role in world history. On the other hand, thanks particularly to the already decades-long work of Decolonial thinkers, it is possible to see how what I called the *emergence* of Latin America was a result of this process that began with colonialism and that, progressively, re-configured its dual relationships internally by means of (post)colonial practices, socio-political articulations, and racial narratives that eventually split the Americas into two parts, hierarchically.

As a result, starting from the nineteenth century onward, it seems impossible to think of Latin America without taking in consideration the crucial role played by the United States. Their geo-political pretensions over Latin America caused a consistent number of interventions, from the military to the diplomatic level. This is a crucial fact to consider while exploring the three cases here. If in Argentina at the turn of the twentieth century the United States represented 'only' an example of modernisation and all the attention was still directed towards Europe, as we will see in the empirical chapters, things were different in post-revolutionary Mexico and



post-war Brazil.<sup>19</sup> In these latter two cases, the United States represented a significant presence, and to some perceived as extremely threatening, with which it was necessary to deal, not only politically but, as we will see in chapter 5 and 6, also culturally; the national identity, after all, was a strategic way to strongly differentiate the countries and, by doing so, place them in clear autonomous positions within the international chessboard.

Thus, after having defined the theoretical tensions and historical challenges in relation to the conception of Latin America, the next chapter will explore the Latin American space through the lens of urbanisation. If it is necessary to consider the urban geographies since the pre-colonial period (given the importance they exerted in the following centuries), the 'urban' would represent one of the most important *enigmas* of the twentieth century and would have an absolute prominence in the debates and practices across the decades. Within this context, capital cities took the form of strategic showcases in which each country – each ruling elite – strongly projected its own postcolonial ambitions of national modernisation.

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<sup>19</sup> The reference is to World War II. Very importantly, the second world conflict determined the United States' role of superpower on the international scene. This of course increased the pressure on Latin American countries as they saw their northern neighbour dramatically gaining its dominance on a global scale.

## CHAPTER 2. Latin America's Urban Geographies: The Apogee of the Twentieth Century's 'Urban Enigma'

### *Introduction*

The re-articulation of the asymmetries of power typical of colonialism has strongly marked Latin America's postcolonial space. Cities were fundamental in order to organise and defend the territories conquered in the colonial enterprise; however, historical narrations have normally focused on countries as coherent objects and partially overlook the crucial role of cities in producing the space around themselves, extending sometimes even beyond the national boundaries. The power of cities was not only expressed in terms of violence and resource exploitation; cultural elements also represented a decisive factor in order to legitimise and naturalise their hegemonic position. As Manuel Castells noted in the 1970s, the *urban ideology*, a sort of unlimited faith in urbanisation as a modernising element, accompanied the deep processes of urban transformation throughout the twentieth century, (Castells 1977) and Latin America was certainly not an exception to that. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the urban challenged the traditional idea of a rural space and, through ambitious projects of renovation in the most iconic capital cities, tried to transform the image of backwardness associated with the countryside. This project was carried out by the ruling elites who attempted to 'modernise' and 'civilise' their countries and therefore place them in a prestigious place on world map as well as, perhaps more importantly, in the world market.

At the same time, alongside these ambitious intentions, Latin American society was rapidly transforming. Like the Euro-American case in the previous century, urbanisation was generating huge changes: the urban, as a socio-spatial process, was spreading far beyond the mere borders of the city. However, differently from the European experience, the sudden spread of huge urban areas as well as the marginalisation of large sectors of the population within the new settlements strongly marked Latin America's urban growth. This kind of spatial metamorphosis characterised by the spread of urbanisation was believed to be a mandatory stage on the path towards the development of former colonial areas but, from a critical perspective, it was proof of a historical relation of dependency with the Euro-American block, highlighted by the dystopic effects in the urban landscape. This perspective, largely ascribable to Dependency theorists, represented a valuable debate in order to reflect upon the urban question from the world periphery.

If the 1960s and 1970s symbolised the apogee of the debates about urbanisation in Latin America, from a critical perspective the urban question became largely discussed thanks to the work of Marxist thinkers such as Henry Lefebvre and David Harvey. However, this chapter argues that innovative elements of Lefebvre's thought such as those included in *The Urban Revolution* were simultaneously elaborated in a similar way by *dependentistas* – especially Aníbal Quijano – in the world periphery. Both conceived urban space as a process that was radically transforming society as a whole. This allows us to reflect upon questions in relation to the spatiality that marks the production of knowledge, sharing postcolonial thinkers' preoccupation regarding the importance of the diverse geographies underlying the production of theory. On the other hand, this discussion is also linked, in a genealogical sense, with other current theorists who, drawing on Lefebvre, see the contemporary space as dominated by a process of planetary urbanisation (Brenner 2009, 2013;

Brenner and Schmid 2014, 2015; Merrifield 2014). Thus, the contribution of Dependency theorists represented a significant and somewhat anticipatory example of what would become the analysis of the urban crisis over the following decades: an example that was theorised from the periphery.

### *The Urban Question in Latin America*

Latin American urbanisation has been investigated from a variety of viewpoints over recent decades. The region underwent a rapid process of urban growth during the twentieth century that changed its socio-spatial shape and, consequently, contributed to a transformation of the very way in which Latin American space is imagined. As a result, scholars have been particularly attracted by these changes that, in many respects, represented an important anticipatory example of urban transformation within the non-Western world. However, the rich literature on Latin America's urbanisation is marked by several discrepancies and, specifically, the attempts to provide regional views on the topic have suffered from frequent intermittences.

As will be discussed in this chapter, although Latin America's urban growth was already noticeable from the beginning of the twentieth century, it achieved extraordinary rates halfway through the century. Starting from then, urbanisation began to be thought as an *issue* in relation to Latin American space (Hardoy 1975a). As regards the regional views, some authors provided detailed accounts of Latin America's urban geographies in light of the ongoing radical changes and, at the same time, taking into account the historical transformation of cities including both colonial and precolonial geographies (Morse 1965, 1975, 1984; De Solano 1975; Hardoy 1975b). These debates were linked with wider investigations that viewed

Latin America as a peripheral area of the world, that is to say that, especially in works of collections of contributions across the region (such as Hardoy 1975a), they were in a dialogue with the Dependency theorists.

In more general terms, during the decade of the 1970s Latin America's critical urban debates was dominated by Marxist approaches. These reflected on the one hand Manuel Castells' international invitation to reflect on the *urban question* (1977) and, at the same time, Dependency scholars' interventions on Latin America's urbanisation that linked the understanding of regional urbanisation within the larger global capitalist dynamics (Quijano 1967, 1968, 1975, 1977; Schteingart 1973; Castells 1973; Cardoso 1975; Hardoy 1975a; Singer 1975). This literature will be further debated in this chapter as, looking from a historical perspective, it constituted an original and innovative experience of urban theory from the non-Western world; literature that has been somehow overlooked in the Anglophone debates on the discipline and has mostly remained untranslated. Although often being supported by specific national examples, these contributions aimed to provide a wide discussion of the features, issues, and general tendencies of Latin American urbanisation.

At the same time, many scholars began to ask theoretical questions about the specificities that defined Latin American cities. The emergence of social marginalisation, segregation and fragmentation across the major urban centres created a need for a theory that could thoroughly encompass the common features and patterns across the region. This attempt to theorise Latin American cities lasted for decades (a detailed account of the 1960s and 1970s is provided by Gorelik [2005]), however, some radical ruptures occurred and changed the way cities were thought and investigated. While in the first period the scholars' attention was particularly focused on the dramatic increase in urban poverty and rapid spread of shantytowns in which *marginality* became an iconic concept

(Morse 1971; Castells 1974; Kowarick 1974; Romero 2001 [1976]; Turner 1976; Quijano 1977b), from the 1980s a shift towards the cultural expression of the city took place. A crucial reference point is Angel Rama's *The Lettered City* (Rama 1996 [1984]), in which the author carries out a theoretical understanding of Latin American cities by highlighting their importance as centres of power organised, from the colonial time up until the present, around the crucial importance of written culture. This represented an important turning point within debates on Latin American urbanism as it shed light on the crucial relevance of cultural aspects for understanding the nature and role of cities; in so doing, Rama's book contributed to move Latin America's critical urban scholarship towards the Postcolonial and Cultural Studies approach that was emerging internationally from the late 1970s (see discussion in the previous chapter). Rama's contribution needs to be understood not only as a reflection of the peculiar cultural aspects that define the image of cities but, more broadly, as a combination of multiple socio-material processes that are spatialised in the specific form of the Latin American city.

Rama's work constituted a sort of pioneering act for a cultural approach to the study of cities that became important for Latin America's urban scholarship during the following decades. Scholars investigated cities' configurations, both historically and at present, focusing on this cultural line which represented, not least, a methodological shift. Following this approach, just to mention a few prominent examples, scholars explored cities in Mexico (García Canclini 1997, 2001 [1995]; Reguillo 1996), Argentina (Sarlo 1988, 2000; Gorelik 1998; Gutman and Reese 1999; García Vargas 2010), and Brazil (Sevcenko 1992; Silva Tellez 1992; Read 2006), in addition to some more general reflections about culture and Latin American cities (Morse and Hardoy 1985; Gorelik 1998; Fuentes Gómez 2000; Remedi 2003). This literature, which involves a rich variety of cities and spans a long period of production, is crossed by multiple differences among the specific

approaches and elements observed by the authors (for example, as discussed by Vargas and Velázquez [2011], there is an internal division between those who preferred to concentrate on capital cities and those who opted for smaller urban centres). In any case, the importance of this scholarship consists in specifically focusing on the *imaginario* (imaginary) of cities (see, for instance, discussion in Huffschmid 2012), aiming to understand cities not only as a result of the socio-spatial transformations occurring on a regional scale but also, and very importantly, considering how they are actually lived, narrated and changed by their dwellers. Of course, as this research will show, the discourse at a level of urban imagination is deeply related to the power relations that the city expressed through its space and practices, and this very discourse is a crucial element at stake in the political area of capital cities.

Moreover, the decades starting from the 1990s signified also the passage from a body of literature that had the main goal of providing a socio-historical reading of Latin American urbanisation at a regional level to a progressive fragmentation of the contributions that began progressively to be understood in connection with global geographies, moving directly from the local to the global scale. For example, national cases of urban transformation started to be inserted within geographies of the 'Third World', or as fragments of global configurations or, more recently, as parts of the 'Global South'. This implied an evident shift towards more fragmented studies and, more specifically, towards a substantial abandonment of the regional socio-spatial perspectives that had characterised the previous decades. Reflecting upon the implosion of industrial urbanisation, scholars focused on the internal geographies of the cities and their subjects, paying particular attention to issues such as spatial

segregation, areas of violence, and life in shantytowns<sup>20</sup>. Hence, the Latin American city started to be thought of as a *fragmented city* (Schapirav 2000). The last few decades offered a rich literature studying Latin American cities according to this approach, scholars studied large cities in many countries (an important collection is provided by Barajas [2002]) such as, significantly for this research, Brazil (Holston 1989, 2008; Caldeira 2000; Goldstein 2003; Penglase 2005; Arias 2006; McCann 2006), Argentina (Gorelik 1999; Torres 2001; Svampa 2001; Vidal-Koppmann 2001), and Mexico (Ferman 1991; Hiernaux-Nicolás 1999; Giglia 2008; Rubalcava and Schteingart 2012; Becerril-Sánchez, Méndez and Garrocho 2013)<sup>21</sup>.

This whole body of literature<sup>22</sup> is very important for this research; having established the goal of exploring the genealogy of Latin America's urban question, the variety of these critical approaches is able to show the main issues that marked the transformations and understanding of Latin American cities across the decades. Looking from a historical perspective, Latin American cities went from being *cities of hope* at the turn of the twentieth century (Pineo and Baer 1998) to end up being *cities of walls* (Caldeira 2000) at the end of the same century. This research explores precisely this contradictorily trajectory in which, at its early stage, the urban was representing an *enigma* swaying between the elites' strong desires of modernisation associated with the cities and the primary socio-economic role exerted by the rural population. Then, a rapid 'urbanisation' of the

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, this was also the result of the international debates that investigated urban centres through the postmodernist lens (Soja 1989; Davis 1990; Ellin 1996; Dear and Flusty 1998; Dear 2000) and provided further theoretical ground for a rupture with regional accounts of urbanisation.

<sup>21</sup> Other relevant examples in relation to Latin American countries are, for instance, those investigating Chile (Sabatini and Arenas, 2000; De Mattos 2002; Fischer, J Jäger and Parnreiter 2003), Bolivia (Goldstein 2004), Colombia (Moser and McIlwaine 2004) and Nicaragua (Rodgers 2014).

<sup>22</sup> In addition to the critical approaches mentioned above, scholars have also investigated Latin American cities from a Marxist perspective, specifically by using the work of Lefebvre and Harvey, and explored questions of social justice, inequality and protest within the urban environment (Rosenthal 2000; Fernandes 2007; Souza 2008; 2009; Betancur 2014; Wilson 2014; Arboleda 2015; Murray and Clapham 2015).



latter generated the process of urban explosion (Romero 2001 [1976]) that would characterise Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. Before discussing these questions in more detail, the next section will focus on the importance of conceptualising Latin American cities by considering colonial heritage, which is thought here as a crucial element to understand their postcolonial transformations, in both physical and socio-spatial terms.

### *Colonial Cities, Future Nations*

This research looks at capital cities in order to explore the powerful spatial relationships which marked the postcolonial period, reflecting on the ways in which iconic transformations of the urban environment were narrated by the ruling elites. The analysis of spatial relationships needs to investigate the specific nature of capital cities in a context that was marked by more than three centuries of colonial history. In other words, the history of urban geographies is able to trace the coordinates that led to the birth of nation states across the old colonial space. In this regard, colonial cities represented fundamental elements for the production of Latin America's postcolonial countries.

Colonial cities constituted specific urban forms whose design depended exclusively on the coloniser's desires. In Latin America this was true also when the empire conquered big indigenous cities, such as in the case of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire, which would be transformed into Mexico City. After the conquest, the city was immediately destroyed in order to be rebuilt again over its fresh ruins but adopting the classic form of a Spanish colonial city<sup>23</sup>. Of course, this does not mean that

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<sup>23</sup> Mexico City was actually the first colonial city built after the Laws of the Indies, a set of rules by which the Spanish Crown organised the life within its colonies; among these there

there are no physical differences among colonial cities; it is actually possible to note variances, for example, between Spanish and Portuguese cities in Latin America. Nonetheless, in the case of Spanish America, the urban plan used in the colonies (the gridiron plan) had no longer been adopted in European cities since the Middle Ages (Smith 1955), an element that highlights the specific context distinguishing the conception of most of Latin America's colonial cities. Instead of using the contemporary knowledge in urban planning which was practiced in the metropolis, the empires gave priority to the specific needs of the colonies and organised the urban environment accordingly. After all, the establishment of permanent settlements has arguably been the most important *action* in the aftermath of modern colonial enterprises (for a set of examples about colonial urbanism across space and time, see AsSaiyyad 1992). Furthermore, at the end of the colonial era, some colonial cities became the hegemonic centre that shaped around themselves the organisation of the newborn nation.

Although the conquest of the Americas is normally seen as the 'beginning' of Latin American history, urban history shows the precolonial period's critical importance for both colonial and postcolonial urban geographies. Pre-colonial urban geography cannot be conceived as a separate urban arrangement but was in fact, as underlined by much of the literature (for example, Hardoy 1975a; Morse 1975, 1984), an era that constituted a crucial map from which the colonial power organised its control. This is still evident today: several of the current urban centres were built on the ruins of important indigenous cities which had been conquered and destroyed first, and then entirely rebuilt afterwards. The most prominent cases are in the Andean region, such as Bogota, Quito and Cuzco, but Mexico City is also an extremely significant example; there is

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was the imposition of building cities using the model of the gridiron plan. As a result, Spanish colonial cities had extremely similar shapes.

substantial correspondence between the pre-Columbian urban pattern and the colonial one, and the latter does not present substantial differences from the postcolonial one (Morse 1984).

The 'new' colonial cities were usually founded on the coast or along the main waterways. Their essential function was to provide structures for commerce with the imperial metropolises; additionally, coastal cities were easier to build and defend in comparison to those in the interior. In the inlands, indigenous populations could rely on the accurate knowledge of a territory which remained often largely unknown to the colonisers for many decades after the conquest, and sometimes even for centuries. Clearly, Buenos Aires corresponded to the group of coastal cities: its purposes from the foundation until the end of the eighteenth century were strictly administrative and (later) commercial, and the nature of the settlement was totally dependent on the role of the colonial port. Furthermore, the strong European presence characterising Buenos Aires' population almost entirely precluded any possibility of participation for the indigenous population in the making of the city (and of the nation); the result came to be a space which was perceived and lived as evidently European. In contrast, in Mexico City the presence of the indigenous population (and its mixing with the European) was and still is crucial for the shaping, and the claiming, of the city's identity. The historical differences between these cities are determinant to understand their transformation, both in physical and social terms.

These differences meant the development of specific conflicts and struggles which materialised in the urban forms in many ways, not least in their very *imagination*, in national, regional, and international dimensions. On the other hand, Brasília represented precisely the attempt to break with these precolonial and colonial urban geographies whose asymmetries were thought to preclude the modernisation of the country (for example, its

central position within the map of the country was due to the strong belief that coastal cities such as Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro were incapable of promoting an even development within Brazil's territories<sup>24</sup>). However, despite the aspects of continuity, the arrival of Europeans brought also *geographical transformations* both in quantitative (the increase in the number of cities) and qualitative terms (the shape of the urban environment and its racial composition). Colonialism gave a strong definition to Latin America's urban geographies.

Colonial cities "were used, both consciously and unconsciously, as social technologies, as strategies of power to incorporate, categorize, discipline, control, and reform, in terms of symbolic code and new system of colonization, both the colonial and the indigenous populations" (King 1990: 9). This technology of rule defined colonial cities according to specific imperial necessities. For example, when it comes to looking at postcolonial urban transformations, the importance of cities in the organisation of the surrounding space, as well as of its colonial/national population, is of crucial importance. In addition, in more general terms, it is possible to define the character of cities depending on the specific configuration of the international (capitalist) economy; according to King, there are clear distinctions between the roles of "the city (the built environment) of mercantile capitalism, the colonial port city, the city of industrial or monopoly capitalism, the postcolonial city, and so on" (King 1993: 262). In other words, thinking of the city as an 'object' somehow separated from the national and international scales would represent a methodological mistake which would prevent an understanding of the variety of geographies in which cities are articulated.

Looking from this perspective, it is also worth noting that, since the colonial period, cities such as Buenos Aires and Mexico City were

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<sup>2424</sup> About similar cases of the relocation of capital cities, see Schatz 2004.

constructed around a double direction of power that was tied on the one hand to Europe (the empire) and on the other to the rest of the colonial space. This singular aspect would somehow be reinforced during the post-independence period, when these cities aimed to lead the national process and, simultaneously, to place themselves in a central position on the international map, in economic, political, and cultural terms (chapter 4, 5, 6). Brasília, on the other hand, lacked a colonial history, but its construction was carried out by means of a strong and rhetorical discourse that had as one of its main points the idea of *colonising* the country's interior in order to better manage the whole of the national space and build a 'modern' nation, therefore constituting a similar case to the others despite the absence of a crucial colonial history. Moreover, as will be discussed later in the chapter, while this feature can be observed in many capital cities<sup>25</sup>, the interest of these cases is that they are all explored during a period of dramatic expansion of population and urbanisation, making progressively more intertwined and complex the traditional division between urban and rural space, spaces that were conceived as clearly separated and substantially disjoined.

Overall, colonial cities primarily performed three roles: firstly, they were bastions of the empire, representing the hands of European countries stretched to the New World; secondly, they were exerting an internal struggle in order to hegemonise an immense surrounding space over which full command was anything but simple; thirdly, colonial cities immediately began to stage a fierce competition among themselves to attract the optimum flows of commerce and people and thereby increase their importance within the colonial scene. For example, Lima and Buenos Aires were competing for hegemony over the Atlantic commerce with Europe at

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<sup>25</sup> There have been relevant contributions attempting to study the city looking precisely at the peculiar status of being a *capital* city: in relation to Latin America see Almandoz 2002, for a broader perspective, see Taylor, Lengellé, and Andrew 1993.

the end of the eighteenth century: eventually the future Argentine capital managed to prevail and became the 'door' of South America, experiencing as a result a dramatic change, in both physical and symbolic terms.

Thus, even at this early stage, it would be improper to conceptualise colonial cities as compact unities totally subjugated to the imperial will. Although European command was undoubtedly strong, the colonial urban settlement was usually characterised by multipolar tensions within itself: European elites, Creole elites, *caudillos*,<sup>26</sup> and the all multifaceted subjectivities which were forming, engaged in a variety of struggles and internal pressures which makes it more appropriate to think about these cities as "semiautonomous" entities, instead of places servilely obedient to the empire (Morse 1975: 70). This means that, even during the colonial era, colonial cities were not merely imperial bastions entirely under the empire's control; rather, many were themselves forces which influenced the colonial power and made imperial direction from overseas extremely complex. Over the centuries, these deep conflicts – particularly evident in the capital cities, where the greatest material interests were at stake – separated progressively and inexorably the local elites' interests from those of the colonial power and eventually brought the colonies to fight for their independence.

This movement towards independence was propelled by specific factors which were mostly concentrated in a colony's main urban areas. The city, which in the beginning was a *technology* built in order to satisfy the empire's needs, ended up constituting the core of the struggle against the empire itself. Over the decades, the elites responsible for managing the colony became the enemy of the empire and attempted to work by themselves rather than for faraway lands beyond the ocean. The elites were

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<sup>26</sup> The Spanish term *caudillo* refers to a military or political leader who rules – usually by a high degree of authoritarianism and violence – a state or a portion of territory. This political figure used to be very common in Latin America, especially during the colonial period when total control of the territory was a hard task for the colonial authority. However, their presence continued during the postcolonial period and represented a problem for the hegemonisation of the new nation-state.

mostly made up of direct descendants of the colonisers, the *creole*: people born in the colonies but viewed as European. This sector of population organised the independence of old colonial administrative areas that would eventually become the (Latin) American nations. One of the main protagonists of the struggles for the liberation was a new political ideology, *nationalism*, which started in the Americas as an anticolonial concept, *before* violently marking the history of Europe from the end of the nineteenth century (Anderson 2006 [1983]: 47-65).

The notable element in this process is that the powerful elites who supported the independence movements typically lived in cities, especially in those in which the economic, administrative, and political activities of the empire were particularly concentrated<sup>27</sup>, that is to say, in many cases, in the future capital city. Thus, it is of extreme significance to look at these processes of nation-building when it comes to studying Latin American capital cities such as Buenos Aires and Mexico City, as these cities usually express, both in their physical and social expressions, the main elements which marked the making of postcolonial countries. However, this does not mean ignoring or denying the role of other cities, nor that of non-urbanised areas; on the contrary, these *spatial tensions* are actually able to uncover the shapes of the postcolonial process as well as highlight the political, social, and cultural geographies which characterised *internal colonialism*.

Capital cities have specific relationships to elements such as the social environment, the geographical location, and the mapping of the national infrastructure. Overall, as King stressed, "the assumption is that the nation, and especially the capital, expresses 'modernity'" (King 1993: 254). In relation to the social aspect, representing the national population in the capital city was an important strategy to portray the modernisation of

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<sup>27</sup> Landowners were the most numerous sectors within these elites, and important roles in commercial and administrative activities were reserved only for Spanish-born people (Anderson 2006 [1983]: 48).

the country. For example, in post-revolutionary Mexico, the indigenous population played a major role in the city's narrations; the national context at the end of the revolution was characterised by an inevitable critical reappraisal of precolonial history and therefore the inclusion, at least at a formal level, of the indigenous population in the making of the national identity. This had concrete consequences, as we will see, on the realisation of the most iconic architecture in Mexico City. On the contrary, the indigenous peoples were not normally part of Buenos Aires' population, and the elites attempted to shape the city's social and cultural identity through a strong European character. This created the city's conception as a European enclave placed at the bottom of the Americas. Finally, Brasília represented the attempt of a rupture with both the past and present of the country through the production of a new city which, thanks to its material configuration, was deemed able to escape the 'traditional' trap of inequality seen as *typical* of Brazilian cities.

Furthermore, the location of capital cities in the national space is another factor of extreme interest, which is able to offer insights into each country's geographies of power across, as well as their transformation over time. In addition, at the same time, capital cities *imagined* themselves within the national space. For example, "as a centre a capital contrasts with the provinces or backwaters, that is, the periphery [...], a contrast still very useful in discussing the politics of space [...]. The capital becomes the focal point of contact with the periphery and other polities; influence, power, control, sanctity, well-being and economic goods (through redistribution) flow towards the periphery, which looks to the centre, and resources, tribute, etc. flow to the hub, allowing major investment of resources, including labour" (Rapoport 1993: 33-34). This describes very well the centralising force exerted by Latin American capital cities over the postcolonial period and, when that geographical centrality was perceived to be missing (such as in Brazil) the need for a new capital city emerged.



Finally, another relevant element is provided by infrastructures and their connections to the capital city. To take only an example, Argentine railways were built under the weight of British capital and their map was (and still is) evidently orientated toward Buenos Aires and its port, not offering any substantial internal connections. This overwhelming presence of the capital city over the national space reveals how the country was built upon this asymmetry, which created an unequal distribution of power across the national space.

It is thus possible to think of capital cities as decisive centres which have re-drawn, to different degrees, the internal geographies of each country. Evidently, this was not the case of Brasília which, as mentioned above, constituted instead a sort of *reaction* to these entrenched geographies of power characterising Latin America. In general terms, architecture assumes a particular relevance in capital cities: the capital is the place in which the nation is represented with particular intensity, and the “centrality is reinforced by an emphasis on meaning and symbolism” (Rapoport 1993: 34). Therefore, looking at the iconic physical transformations of these cities is extremely relevant in order to understand the *desires* which characterised specific moments of the postcolonial period. To sum up, on the one hand capital cities seem to have been crucial in organising and representing political, economic, and cultural geographies which defined each country’s national identity and beyond, that is, placing themselves in the regional and international competition with other capital cities and seeking to achieve an important position in the world market. In so doing, they have incessantly contributed to produce that contradictory ‘space’ called Latin America. However, on the other hand the image of Latin American has not traditionally been associated with its urban environment; on the contrary, as mentioned in the introduction, due to its historical position in the global market as an exporter of raw materials, as well as the formidable struggles of the peasantry throughout the twentieth century, the dominant images of

Latin America have tended to be predominantly rural and agrarian. This tension between rural and urban space on a level of the imagination mirrors the transformations that, since colonial time, have participated in the contradictory making of Latin American space.

### *The Urbanisation of Latin American Society*

Although capital cities and urban life were celebrated as demonstrating the arrival of modernity in Latin America from the beginning of the twentieth century, Latin America remained attached to a general image of rural space until the end of that century. There were historical factors that strengthened this idea. During the colonial epoch, American territories constituted massive areas for the European exploitation of natural resources such as, to give the most prominent examples, gold, silver, and copper<sup>28</sup>. When it came to independence, the role of the newborn Latin American countries did not change its substance. Once part of the international scene, Latin America continued to be crucial in the international market of natural resources and agricultural products – such as coffee, sugar cane, and wheat – satisfying the desires of the former empires (and progressively also emerging powers such as the United States). To sum up, the perception of being rural was mostly due to the structure of the economy within the geographical divisions distinguishing the international dimension of capitalism.

This configuration of the global market generated a likewise sharp division of labour, that signified the crucial role of the peasantry in twentieth century Latin American society. While Europe was experiencing the struggles of the industrial working class, in Latin America a succession of peasant uprisings and rebellions contributed to the fuelling of the

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<sup>28</sup> The twentieth century would see oil as a fundamental resource that put at stake the geopolitical position of many Latin American countries in the global scene.

Western/European imagination about a rural space that was characterised by profound social turbulence. Just to give a few famous examples: the Mexican Revolution in the 1910s, the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and, again in Mexico, the Zapatista movement in the early 1990s. Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the popular calls for 'agrarian reform' was an issue for any government in office in Latin America: in general terms, the ownership of land constituted one of the most prominent areas of dispute between national elites and the rest of the population.

Nonetheless, at the same time the twentieth century represented a period of radical transformation for Latin American society, whose internal configuration had been profoundly redesigned. Above all, two factors experienced a dramatic alteration: population and urbanisation. If the former can be rapidly summarised in quantitative terms, the latter is worth a deeper analysis as it involved a qualitative change – *the way of life* – which transformed the social dimension of Latin America.

With regard to population, there was an exponential growth over the century: while in 1900 Latin America was inhabited by 60.1 million people, the figure by 1950 had risen to 167 million, and in the second part of the century accelerated further from 284.8 million in 1970 to 520 million in 2000. With regard to the period under analysis in this research (1880-1964), the overall Latin American population grew within this period by approximately 900%. Focusing on the three countries under analysis, Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil were all in line with this formidable change. In the case of Argentina, the arrival of European migrants boosted the figures as well as, more importantly, the character of the internal transformation, posing further questions in relation to national identity and involving, to some extent originally within the Latin American context, a specific and strongly European image of the country.

Overall, in each country where this occurred, the dramatic increase in population signified a concomitant increase in urban population.

Although there are some discrepancies between the national (and regional) figures, the Latin American urban population rose from 25% in 1925 to 61.2% in 1975. If Argentina had been one of the most urbanised countries in Latin America (65.3% in 1950 and 78.4% in 1970), Mexico and Brazil followed a similar pattern (respectively 59.0% and 55.8% in 1975) (Lattes 2001). These data are simply too limited to describe accurately the nuances and differences of the urban change that took place, but they should be sufficient to offer a picture of the social metamorphosis experienced by Latin America throughout the century and with particular intensity during its second half. In 2000 Latin America's urban population was 75.3%. Brazil's level of urbanization increased dramatically in the last 25 years of the twentieth century, reaching 81.3% in 2000; a similar pattern occurred in Mexico, which touched 74.4% in the same year; while Argentina's already high figure rose further to 89.9% (Lattes 2001).

The size of this transformation not only generated a radical physical expansion of Latin American cities – often drastically remoulding the capital cities – but, on the whole, also signified a historical turning point that Quijano described as “the urbanization of Latin American society” (Quijano 1975). Thus, the change was not just quantitative; society itself was turned into something new and different from the ‘traditional’ rural landscape – a process that to such an extent was also experienced, at least on a formal level, only by Europe and North America. Of course, especially from the 1960s, that phenomenon did not pass unnoticed by Latin American scholars; in fact, urbanisation was one of the huge questions characterising socio-economic debates globally in the decades after the Second World War.

In addition, another element characterised the urban/rural relationship in the twentieth century: while international migration, especially from Europe, was one of the causes of the growth of urban population such as in the case of Argentina, overall the most important factor explaining the urban explosion was that of internal migration,

precisely from the countryside to the city. In Latin America, from 1925 to 1975, 117 million people abandoned rural life in the hope of finding a better life in the city; the figure describes the nature of the transformation and, as will be shown, offers an idea of the extreme importance that the urban question had in twentieth century Latin America. All of this was most obviously materialised in projects of renovation of capital cities. Beginning with Buenos Aires' French ambitions at the turn of the century, and probably epitomised in the technical faith which marked the conception of Brasília, the urban was an element continuously at stake in the attempts to lead the ongoing social transformations towards a wider process of modernisation of the countries. Paradoxically, dramatic urban growth represented both an advantage and limit to the elites' promotion of modernity. If, on the one hand, there was a strong belief in the necessity of an urban society which was thought in opposition to the 'backwardness' of the countryside, on the other, the 'new' cities soon showed the dystopic effects defining the urban transition.

### *Dependency Theory and the Geographies of Development*

Although this research is framed in the period between 1880 and 1964, there are many reasons why the debates that occurred the 1960s and 1970s deserve particular attention. These two decades represent a period in which the aforementioned social transformations were absolutely evident, as was the continuity of that process in the following years. However, the urban question had been at stake throughout the twentieth century and even before; it had acquired progressive importance since the post-independence period when the re-organisation of power was coordinated – in economic, political, and cultural terms – from the main urban centres. Since then

principal cities exerted their force over the national space and tried to legitimise this hegemony through the 'modern' prestige of the urban.

The end of World War II represented a fundamental event in which the aftermath of the conflict was rapidly followed by a drastic process of decolonisation – in which Latin America was obviously not involved – that resulted in a great number of newly independent national states acting on the international scene. According to the Western states, there was a winning strategy that would have allowed the former colonies to reach the level of the most advanced countries, conceiving the development of the countries in linear dimension divided into progressive stages of economic growth (Rostow 1990 [1960]). In this sense Latin America, as part of what was going to be conceived as the 'Third World', was clearly included in that discourse (Escobar 1995). It was said that economic growth, as a measure of development, was the consequence of a combined process of political modernisation, industrialisation, and urbanisation, therefore outlining a radically progressive conception of human history.

According to Euro-American modernisation theories, two quantitative elements were indicated as infallible indicators of stages of modernisation: urbanisation and industrialisation. However, Latin America was offering a contradictory picture. The dramatic urban growth which characterised the twentieth century was undoubtedly the result of processes distinct from industrialisation. As Arturo Almandoz pointed out, there was a relevant disparity between industrialisation and urbanisation in Latin America (Almandoz 2006): contrary to the theories of development, urbanisation came *before* the process of industrialisation and, when the latter began to grow, the discrepancy was even more evident, as the problem of urban marginality has shown. Nevertheless, although the idea of having a strong industrial structure coupled with efficient, modern and powerful capital cities was evidently present in the aspirations of Latin American elites from the beginning of the century (Argentina is an evident

case), such a project was fully theorised and practiced in the mid-century. A developmentalist ideology

“was backed since 1948 by the creation of international agencies such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), both sponsored by the United Nations (UN) and the USA’s growing interest in the region’s primary and industrial exploitation” (Almandoz 2006: 95).

Nonetheless, starting from the 1950s, the urban transformations presented specific and somehow unexpected issues that were not in the plan of the positivist ideas of economic/urban growth. First and foremost, the great urban agglomerations that were spreading over Latin America were progressively characterised by the figure of the urban poor. The flows of migrants coming from the countryside were soon converted into marginalised segments of the urban population which would become a feature of Latin American cities. Slums and shantytowns became a negative symbol of Latin America’s specific urbanisation, marking the idea of a dystopic development closely associated with a systematic failure to ‘modernise’ the urban environment.

Latin America in the mid-twentieth century was the first case of ‘urban society’ in the non-Western world, in the sense that it largely anticipated the process of rapid urbanisation that would define the former colonial world at the end of the century. In 1950 the level of urbanisation in Latin America was 41.4%, whereas in Asia it was 17.4% and in Africa 14.7% (North America and Europe had respectively 63.9% and 52.4%) (Lattes 2001). Thus, in terms of urbanisation, there was a radical discrepancy between Latin America and the rest of the world peripheries, making the former an exception among non-Western countries.

The whole of this socio-spatial change was critically and originally investigated by Dependency theorists whose debate constitutes for several

reasons a milestone in Latin America's genealogy of critical thought. Firstly, it embodied both an original expression of Marxism (by taking into account the heavy heritage of colonialism) and, at the same time, a *reaction* to the Eurocentric theories of socio-economic progress (including also orthodox Marxism). Secondly, as a result, the Dependency debate was also a *geographical* challenge to the production of knowledge, in the sense that its formulations were produced from the *margins* of the global system: this defied the modality through which theory was produced in Euro-American centres and then *universalised*. This fact posed a question about the *location* of knowledge and represented one of the first attempts – on a large scale, and regardless of the many incongruences – to mark an epistemological rupture with Western-hegemonic theories. Thirdly, Dependency theory would constitute a significant source for future articulations of critical thought. If, on the one side, Dependency theory was part of a long critical discussion on development whose starting point can be traced at least to the last quarter of twentieth century (see Grosfoguel [2000: 347-356]), on the other, *dependentistas*, despite significant differences, represented a remarkable experience for what would become Decolonial scholarship and was to some extent anticipatory in relation to it. Decolonial scholars continued to pose the critical questions related to, for example, the permanence of (post)colonial relations as well as to the extreme importance of the geographies of knowledge. After all, both scholarships viewed Aníbal Quijano as one of the most relevant figures, and looking through his work it is possible to see how these different stages represent attempts to formulate valid answers to the same questions.

In addition to these three reasons, and very importantly in this context, Dependency theorists' work was also extremely relevant with regard to the study of urbanisation; in particular, as will be discussed in the following section of this chapter, it is essential to underline two elements of importance and both are related to the *scale* of the analysis. On the one side,



*dependentistas* investigated urbanisation on the international dimension by conceiving it as a phenomenon indissolubly tied to the world economy: as a result of the centre/periphery model, *local* questions were inevitably seen as *global* questions. On the other side, there was the attention towards the regional dimension, that is, they deeply investigated the dialectical relationship between 'rural' and 'urban', seeing such a relationship as something problematic and not just as a mere dual opposition of spaces. Finally, these two levels of reflection were thought as interrelated through a hierarchical relationship, which means that changes in the internal structure of the periphery were the result of the transformations that occurred in the centre. These Dependency theorists' reflections upon the double scalar dimension will be the lens through which the urban question in 1960s' and 1970s' Latin America is explored in the following section.

### ***Aníbal Quijano: Planetary Urbanisation from the Periphery***

While the latter part of the twentieth century saw the spread of urbanisation as a major factor, the question had already been progressively emerging over the previous decades. Current works in critical urban studies normally highlight the importance of Lefebvre's work in anticipating powerful conceptual insights with respect to a world that was rapidly and inevitably becoming completely urbanised (Lefebvre 2003 [1970])<sup>29</sup>. However, during the same period, from the periphery of the world – namely, from areas that according to some Marxist views had only the possibility to follow Western patterns – Dependency theorists such as Quijano produced theoretical contributions that were remarkably similar to Lefebvre's. The

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<sup>29</sup> For example, Brenner stated: "as Lefebvre *anticipated* nearly four decades ago, this process [of urbanisation] now increasingly unfolds through the uneven stretching of an 'urban fabric', composed of diverse types of investment patterns, settlement spaces, land use matrices and infrastructural networks, across the entire world economy" (Brenner 2009: 205, emphasis added).

understanding of the urban question from the 'periphery', normally unknown or ignored in academic debates in the Euro-American world, shows how Latin America somehow anticipated debates that would be progressively prominent in the Western 'centres' over the following decades – such as those centred on urban crisis and urbanisation of control – and allows us to explore the genealogy of contemporary urbanisation from another space (and time), that is, from a different point of view.

This section is a reconstruction of the early history of the processes of 'planetary urbanisation' and its earliest enigmatic questions from a peripheral standpoint. During that crucial period of the 1960s and 1970s, Dependency theorists offered remarkably significant and original contributions that consisted of strong critical responses to the mainstream Western social theories hegemonic at that time. In the view of Dependency theorists, urbanisation was to be studied within the dynamics of the international system. This was a relevant point; in contrast to perspectives considering the urban environment as something somehow separated from the global dimension – and therefore the city as an object characterised only by internal elements – *dependentistas* investigated Latin America's urban transformations as *consequences* of the asymmetrical relationships in the international scene. For example, just looking at the wording of Dependency theorists' main works, *urbanisation*, *dependency*, and *imperialism* are constantly put side by side as something theoretically indivisible (Quijano 1967, 1968, 1977; Schteingart 1973; Castells 1973, 1977; Hardoy 1975a). More specifically, Manuel Castells described the process ongoing in Latin America by using the specific category of "dependent urbanisation" (*urbanización dependiente*) (Castells 1973: 7), ascribing its urban dystopias to the subaltern position it had occupied since colonial times. This position was largely shared among Dependency theorists, who stressed two aspects. On the one hand, they stressed how colonialism had created a disjointed urban fabric as it had been shaped according to the empire's needs for

extraction/collection of raw materials and transatlantic commerce and, on the other, how the post-independence period not only consisted in the perpetuation of these unequal relationships, but that industrial and financial capitalism further aggravated the picture by giving birth to huge cities characterised by the massive presence of rural migrants, marginality, and poverty.

However, according to Quijano, the understanding of urban change is rather more sophisticated. He noted that, despite the fact that “urbanisation in Latin America is a *dependent process*”, it is not “a merely mechanic and unidirectional correlation, as the socio-historical matrix’s singularities and specificities of each of our societies permanently act as an intermediation system between the two processes, and the modifications produced by urbanisation generate also changes in the very relationship of dependency, so that the dependency system as such is modified also as a result of the changes within dependent societies” (Quijano 1968: 534, emphasis added). This view of dependent urbanisation’s relationships somehow distinguishes Quijano’s elaborated interpretation of the centre/periphery model and, by the same token, his work on dichotomic relationships such as the important one between urban and rural.

Quijano did not look at urban space and rural space as two separated and disconnected horizons. On the contrary, even though they represent different and distant organisations and conceptions of society, their configurations were “permanently interdependent” (Quijano 1975: 135). As a consequence, “it is impossible to study what is happening in one of those sectors without first establishing where it coincides and where it conflicts with the other” (Quijano 1975: 136). It was thus a *relationship* that connected the two sectors. The profound interest in this dichotomy was obviously the consequence of the urban expansion that accompanied the huge migration from rural to urban spaces. However, quite originally, Quijano problematised these factors by putting them in relation to what he

understood as a broader transformation occurring in Latin American society. This meant to take into account material, sociological, and cultural elements that were operating alongside the 'simple' movement of people from one environment to another.

According to Quijano, urbanisation was not 'just' a matter of cities' growth, but it was a process that involved society as a whole; for example, he stated that Latin America was experiencing the *urbanisation of the economy* and this was responsible for a deep change in the relationship between urban and rural (Quijano 1967: 5). In general terms, Latin America was experiencing the passage from its 'traditional' agrarian model to the industrial and urban, and this meant a progressive prevalence of the tertiary sector – characterising the urban centres – as well as of the secondary, over the primary (especially with regard to agriculture)<sup>30</sup> (Quijano 1967: 5). However, Quijano stressed that, until the dramatic social/urban transformation, there was a significant independence between urban and rural space as they were substantially isolated from each other: any change that occurred in one side was substantially indifferent to the other – although the urban tended to change much more rapidly and noticeably (Quijano 1967: 9).

Nonetheless, Quijano noted, "at present [at the time of writing], this situation seems to be completely changing": that isolation was "mostly destroyed" and the rural was "increasingly placed in a position of dependency [...] in such a way that each of the processes that happen on an urban level necessarily affect, directly or indirectly, slowly or quickly, the rural life" (Quijano 1967: 9). Although the opposite direction was also possible, Quijano underlined that such transformation could not merely be seen as the result of a period of urban growth; it was actually an aspect of

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<sup>30</sup> Challenging the modernization theory's ideology according to which the stage of development would increase depending on the gradual shift from the primary to the tertiary sector, Ramón Grosfoguel pointed out that "they divided societies into modern and traditional sectors" (Grosfoguel 2000: 359).

the wider process of *urbanisation of society* that was happening on a regional scale. As a result, urban and rural sectors (and their deep connections) could not be fully understood other than through this larger perspective.

Precisely during those years, Lefebvre famously described what he conceived as a planetary socio-spatial transformation in these words: “we can say that the urban [...] rises above the horizon, slowly occupies an epistemological field, and becomes the episteme of an epoch” (Lefebvre 2003[1970]: 191). Quijano’s reflection is significantly similar to Lefebvre’s with respect to that epistemological change that would change for both the way in which space was to be thought. One of the important points here is to note how these questions were articulated in spaces – Latin America and Europe – that were radically different in terms of the geo-political division of the world; in other words, one was coming from the ‘centre’ and the other from the ‘periphery’ of the global space. It is relevant, also, to stress that both thinkers produced an understanding of Marx’s ideas that was strongly influenced by their geographical location<sup>31</sup>.

Contributing to an innovative and non-orthodox idea of Marxism, Lefebvre investigated the role of the city, as well as urban life as a whole, and its strategic importance in producing and re-producing the social space in contemporary society (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]). He conceived the urban as a wide set of social and material relations which came to exceed the city itself up until invading, from the 1970s, the entirety of the surface of human activities and therefore achieving the stage of *planetary urbanisation* (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]). As a result of his historical reflection upon urban transformations, Lefebvre pointed out that it was during the nineteenth century’s industrial era that the city not only definitively established its domination over the countryside, but also began to develop social, material,

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<sup>31</sup> In this respect it is worth mentioning again Quijano’s theoretical debt with the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui - who formulated a highly original expression of Marxism from the (postcolonial) periphery (Mariátegui 1971 [1928]) – as well as Lefebvre’s (problematic) relationship with colonialism (Kipfer and Goonewardena 2013).

and ideological relationships that spread the urban in the form of “disjunct fragments” beyond the traditional space of the city itself (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]: 14). More specifically, in the second half on the twentieth century, due to the dramatic changes in the global economy as well as its relationships and technologies, these fragments finally invaded the global space, clearly exceeding the mere form of the city. In the field of urban studies, these transformations created the need for new concepts in order to understand the ongoing process. In other words, as stressed by Brenner and Schmid’s elaboration of Lefebvre’s work, at the end of the 1960s urban studies underwent an “epistemic crisis” (Brenner and Schmid 2015: 154): the city lost its centrality in favour of a more generally and spatially unstable concept such as ‘the urban’. It is remarkably interesting to note how the ‘remote’ periphery of Latin America experienced, and reflected upon (especially through Quijano’s work) very similar problems at that time.

What is at stake here is not a comparison between Quijano and Lefebvre, nor a claim saying that they basically expressed the same ideas. The point is that, at least from the late 1960s, the urban question became an unavoidable part of the transformations ongoing globally; although to different degrees, urbanisation was spreading over all areas of the planet and was creating that global system in which urban processes were dominant for the reformulation of its geographies, something that can be seen as a process which tended towards the “planetary formation of capitalist urbanization” (Brenner and Schmid 2015: 153). Within this global scene, specific reflections were elaborated accordingly to the area of investigation. In this sense, Lefebvre framed his investigation starting from the European example, whereas Quijano – who was experiencing at that time a ‘stage’ of urbanisation which was, as discussed above, in between the West (Europe and North America) and the rest of the planet (such as Africa and Asia) – thought from the margins of the international system. The core of my reflection here is to stress how the same question was

articulated differently depending on the location in which it was formulated; in other words, these debates can be considered as the spatialisation of the urban question during one of its crucial periods. Therefore, the similarities between these two important bodies of work are particularly relevant. For example, Lefebvre incessantly insisted on the fact that space was not to be conceived as “a thing” but actually as “a relation between things” (1991[1974]: 83), therefore implying the theoretical shift of the city (and urban) from object to *concept*. In this respect, Quijano also reflected upon the nature of concepts such as urban and rural in 1966<sup>32</sup>, in an essay on the socio-cultural aspects of urbanisation, and made some important contributions on Latin America’s internal migrations. Speaking of demographical elements, he specified that all settlements having more than 2,000 inhabitants were considered to be urban – and those smaller to be rural. However, he also noted that urban centres which have less than 2,000 people “accomplish urban functions” (Quijano 1977: 72) and problematised the merely quantitative definition of the urban, proposing that we reflect upon alternative and more sophisticated ways to differentiate urban from rural.

Quijano indicated the *urban functions* performed by those little agglomerations:

“they concentrate the local commerce as well as that of the scattered local population [...], they work as a municipal administrative centre or as the municipality’s head office, they concentrate educative institutions if there are any, they concentrate craft production and, finally, they include a

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<sup>32</sup> The essay was republished with little modification in a book in 1977, to which I refer here. However, it is important to note the first dates of these reflections as they somehow anticipate part of Lefebvre’s argument in 1970’s *The Urban Revolution* (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]).

relatively high proportion of people who are not directly working in agriculture and livestock” (Quijano 1977: 72).

Although not framing theoretically the problem in the same way as Lefebvre, Quijano questioned the contemporary meaning of the urban by highlighting the inadequacy and obsolescence of the theoretical tools used at that moment. He argued that, in order to give “a more complete distinction of urban, semi-urban, and rural settlements, each case should include the ecological and demographic aspects, as well as delimitation of the *functions*” (Quijano 1977: 72). Quijano underlined that something was changing in the nature of the urban, it was not only a matter of how many people lived in a settlement or the number of buildings concentrated in an area, it was instead a wider and more complex set of activities which involved the transformation of the whole society.

According to Quijano, the rural-to-urban movement of populations in Latin America was to be studied in relation to the “modification of the relationship between city and countryside”, that is to say that “the city is modernising and the countryside is increasingly influenced by the urban – to the extent that the current *process of urbanisation* signified a process of formation of *the modern urban society in Latin America*” and therefore “the migrant flows have to follow the channels supplied by the process of modernisation” (Quijano 1977: 75, emphasis added). Thus, Quijano’s spatial analysis did not consist in the mere contraposition between rural and urban space; that problematic relationship was shaped by changes within the capitalist system and urbanisation, following the last quote, was to be understood as a sort of synonym of modernisation. This was obviously not part of a developmentalist conception of society but was the certainty that capitalism’s new transformations involved this strong *process of urbanisation*



– in the sense of something whose meaning was going far beyond the physical expression of the urban environment<sup>33</sup>.

In relation to Latin America, these reflections on the complex relationships between urban and rural had been a constant preoccupation in relation to national identity; the cases of urban transformation here under study are characterised by deep concerns about what was normally articulated as a strong duality. In the mainstream narration, and therefore on the elite level, urban and rural were usually synonyms of present and past, modern and backward, developed and underdeveloped, West and non-West. These temporal and ideological elements were strongly at stake in the urban transformations of Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Brasília. In the physical renovation of these cities materialised the paradoxes of the Latin American elites, whose interests at that time often clashed between the wealth generated from the exploitation of the countryside and the aspiration to ‘modernity’ embodied in the city. Within this context, cultural elements were crucial in order to legitimise the superiority of the city and urban life over the rest of the national space. This *urban ideology* crossed the whole twentieth century as a “specific ideology that sees the modes and forms of social organization as characteristic of a *phase of the evolution of society*, closely linked to the technico-natural conditions of human existence and, ultimately, to its environment” (Castells 1977: 73, emphasis added). The urban represented a stage, a necessary episode on the road towards modernity, and it was so much idealised that a “science of the urban” was conceived (Castells 1977: 74), therefore imagining the urban as an object as such, separated from any social, material, or historical context.

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<sup>33</sup> For example, in order to stress the supremacy of the urban within the changing context, Quijano noted that the urbanisation of a sector of society (economy, culture, demography, and so forth) inevitably entailed the transformation of others, as that change could not happen in isolation from the rest of the social structures (Quijano 1975: 112-113).

This cultural environment was clearly evident in Latin America; with particular regard to the transformations here under investigation, these changes were accompanied with an absolute faith in both science (and technology) and the urban as formidable elements of progress and development. As Quijano pointed out, “the dependency relationships are not expressed only in economic and political terms, but they cover all the basic institutional spheres of the dependent society among which, above all, are the cultural and psychosocial spheres” (Quijano 1968: 542). Furthermore, regarding cultural aspects, there was not only the ideology of the urban, but the fact that urban culture itself was spreading beyond the limits of the city, and was set to invade the rural space in a process Quijano termed the “urbanisation of the countryside”, that is to say “the diffusion of cultural elements of the urban over the countryside” (Quijano 1967: 6). At the same time, vice versa, the huge rural migration towards the city created the “ruralisation” of urban culture (Quijano 1967: 6); in any case, the first example remained the more evident<sup>34</sup>. Finally, Quijano underlined that it was possible to call the urban culture “dependent urban culture” as it was largely shaped through models belonging to the “dominant external metropolises”, models that were in competition with “popular urban culture” – which mostly came from the rural migrants who normally remained in subaltern position and constituted the “dominated urban subculture” (Quijano 1967: 7).

As mentioned earlier, these contributions show how Quijano, and Dependency theorists as a whole, offered a notable contribution within Marxist thought. On the one hand, their contribution represented a nuanced theoretical description of the geographies of colonialism that were still marking the postcolonial space. For example, Quijano noted how

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<sup>34</sup> Quijano interestingly stressed that the migration of culture did not necessarily correspond to demographic migration; in the case of urban culture in the countryside the migration took place through elements distinct from the movement of people (Quijano 1967: 6-7).

dependency, in the case of urban processes, is not a simple linear relationship but works on various scales, being also affected by the peripheries. He also stressed the importance of cultural elements which play in a complex way and are a fundamental part of the hegemony of the urban. At the same time, these considerations were a specific view *from the South*, that is to say they were not just a mechanic application of theoretical tools coming from the 'North'<sup>35</sup>, including orthodox Marxism, for instance. It represented a call for the extreme importance of colonialism in the analysis of post-independence relationships, within and outside the field of urban studies<sup>36</sup>. Dependency debates on urbanisation can be thought of as the culmination of the urban/rural debate in Latin America, at a historical moment in which social transformations brought those questions to their extremes.

### *The Location of Theory: Challenging Eurocentrism*

The final question that concludes this chapter is the relationship between space and theory. After having seen the connections among analysis shaped in different areas of the world in the 1960s and 1970s, this section offers some reflections on the landscape of current critical urban theory. As mentioned earlier, one of the most important features describing

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<sup>35</sup> This argument is highlighted, among others, by Grosfoguel, who defined Dependency theorists' challenge to Modernisation Theory as "a struggle between two geo-cultural locations" (Grosfoguel 2000: 359).

<sup>36</sup> For example, during the time in which the United States exerted a hegemonic role internationally, and with particular intensity over Latin America (in political, economic, and ideological terms), Quijano noted how that influence was also expressed in relation to urban questions and regardless of the European experience, which progressively lost its primary position: "It seems that the North American is the only case taken as a typical model of the relationship between urban growth-industrial development, to validate the idea of industry-urban growth sequence, forgetting that it is actually an atypical phenomena historically; for example, following the development of the current industrial societies, London used to have a more than a million population in 1800" (Quijano 1977: 49).

Dependency Theory was its challenge to the dominant/Euro-American theories from *elsewhere*. A few years later, in the anglophone world, the power relations underlying the geographies of the production of knowledge, as well as the active heritage of colonialism inscribed in the contemporary world, became a central question for postcolonial studies (see chapter 1). In particular, as we are going to see, postcolonial urban thinkers engaged with this kind of issue very seriously. What is the importance of *location* in the production of urban theory? Are there privileged places/cities to follow as examples of urban development? Recent critical urban scholarship has explored this epistemological territory deeply.

However, to begin with, it is helpful to briefly outline some recurring concepts in the field of urban studies. For instance, non-Western contexts have frequently been described as something specific and completely different from 'advanced' Euro-American experiences. As discussed in the previous chapter, labels such as 'Third World' or 'Global South' in relation to a particular form of urbanisation often described these distortions, as in something chronically incapable of conforming to Western standards (Roy 2009a). The spread of slums and shantytowns is portrayed within a situation of 'uncontrolled' urbanisation that is understood as a typical trait of non-Western areas (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; Rao 2006; Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 2010; Prakash 2010). In such a way, the non-Western world is permanently trapped in a different *time* in that it is defined by these dystopic processes that underscore its unbridgeable distance from the West (Chakrabarty 2000).

Following this epistemological standpoint, Euro-American cities represented the main source of comparison in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, constituting the model for an alleged coherent and efficient of urban (and national) modernisation. Paris, London, Manchester, Chicago, and Los Angeles became, on the one hand, symbols of the process of

industrialisation and modernisation, and at the same time they were also expressions of how to challenge the profound changes that were the result of those rapid processes of material, social and cultural transformation. For example, it is interesting to note that within censuses carried out at the turn of the twentieth century in Buenos Aires, the figures of the Argentine capital are ostentatiously compared to those of European and North American cities such as Berlin, Boston, and Chicago as if they constituted a yardstick to imitate or self-evaluate the Argentine city within a global context (Censo General de Población 1889a, 1906, 1910).

Looking at urban studies as a discipline, the Chicago School of Urban Sociology represented one of the earliest and most famous examples in that sense. Between the 1920s and 1930s, this scholarship saw the urban environment as a specific space defined by precise physical, economic, and demographic features; cities are thought of as relatively stable objects that can be analysed adopting some specific (in this case sociological) tools (Dear 2002). Chicago was not only the academic workplace of the group; the city was also the favourite terrain of empirical investigation, a fact that meant a strong epistemological direction in the making of urban scholarship: Chicago was considered an up-to-date model for the study of the contemporary urban environment. This tendency to think of Euro-American cities as key examples for any urban experience globally is a critical element to take into account when it comes to (critically) studying the urban environment in the non-West. As postcolonial urban thinkers have forcefully noted, that epistemic approach is rather Eurocentric, in the sense that the scholarship is shaped according to a hierarchical ranking that locates the Western experience in the most advanced point of that progressive conception (Rao 2006; Robinson 2006, 2015; Roy 2009a, 2011). In other words, it is an articulation of that linear idea of history that disconnects non-European time from Western contemporaneity (see chapter 1).

Ananya Roy stressed how urban scholarship is unavoidably defined by the necessity of “dislocating the Euro-American centre of theoretical production” (Roy 2009a: 820). She aptly specified that, in order to avoid the reproduction of the “Orientalist” approach in urban studies, namely the idea that Third World cities are seen – from the West – as “the heart of darkness”, it is necessary to “move” the production of theory to the “Global South” (Roy 2009a: 820). Instead of applying in a mechanical way theories forged in the North in order to answer questions framed in the North, Roy’s call is for a theory which comes from the specific space of investigation. That is, Southern tools for Southern questions. Only after that move, according to her, will it be possible to test these concepts transnationally and see what they are able to say in relation to global urbanism (see, for example, Simone 2001). The transnational method is therefore significantly different from the comparative; while the former explores globally socio-spatial links, the latter is concerned with correspondences or dissimilarities between different areas (see chapter 3). In this sense, using a transnational method, as Latin America’s urbanisation was strongly characterised by *urban informality*, this very urban informality was investigated in other areas of the world starting from its features in the Latin American context (Roy and AlSayyad, 2004).

This approach aims to subvert the geography of knowledge by provincialising the Euro-American scholarship and to open the space to other experiences coming from elsewhere. In this way, Dependency Theory seems to have constituted an example of theory from the South: without explicitly posing problems about the spatiality of the production of knowledge, *dependentistas* provided an investigation which started *from* the particular situation marking the periphery and stressed why their position was important given the world’s political and economic configuration. Thus, although Dependency theorists did not manage to avoid the Eurocentric view on several elements (such as, for example, some

conceptions of state and economy [Grosfoguel 2000]), they most likely represented one of the earliest prominent examples to set a *rupture* with Western authoritarianism in terms of production of theory. However, in more general terms, this does not mean that – quoting Storper and Scott’s criticism of Roy – “an idea developed at place a must invariably fail when transferred to place b” (Storper and Scott 2016: 1122), nor that a theory produced in the North is necessarily wrong. On the contrary, in my view, the substantial problem is that some areas of the world are seen as models, and therefore research based on these places is considered to be more valid theoretically than other areas – in what is generally called the (Global) ‘South’ – which have implicitly reserved for them the option only to follow, as if they inevitably suffered from an impossibility to produce valuable research of their own.

In order to draw an outline of current critical urban theory, in addition to the postcolonial thinkers’ approach (here only briefly summarised) it is necessary to mention the importance of neo-Lefebvrian scholars. Following Lefebvre’s work these thinkers conceive the urban above all as a “theoretical category” (Brenner and Schmid 2015: 163) which is not easily identifiable through empirical/quantitative elements such as population, agglomeration, infrastructure, and so forth (Brenner and Schmid 2014). Breaking any inside/outside distinctions, these scholars describe contemporary urban geographies by stating that “the erstwhile boundaries of the city – along with those of larger, metropolitan units of agglomeration – are being *exploded* and reconstituted as new forms of urbanization reshape inherited patterns of territorial organization, and increasingly crosscut the urban/non-urban divide itself” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 154, emphasis added). More precisely, their theoretical perspective is built upon Lefebvre’s concept of planetary urbanisation (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]), that is, they rely on the fact that current global space can only be understood as urban. Brenner and Schmid continuously remind

us that “the urban is a process, not a universal form, settlement type or bounded unit” and, as a result, there is “no singular morphology of the urban; there are, rather, many processes of urban transformation that crystallize across the world at various spatial scales, with wide-ranging, often unpredictable consequences for inherited sociospatial arrangements” (Brenner and Schmid 2015: 165). Planetary urbanisation approach has been criticised by Postcolonial thinkers who have highlighted its fail in understanding the importance of indigenous knowledge and struggles (Kipfer 2018), the lack of an *outside* that somehow naturalise urban processes (Jazeel 2018), and the risk of a reductionist approach to capitalist globalisations in terms of an all-encompassing urban phenomena (Reddy 2018).

Overall, looking at these contemporary critical approaches to urban studies allows us to highlight the originality of Dependency theorists within this brief genealogy of crucial questions distinguishing critical scholarship. More precisely, it is somewhat revealing to see that perspectives such as postcolonial and planetary urbanisation share problems that were already explored, although differently, in the world periphery in the 1960s and 1970s. This means seeing the cases here under analysis, as well as related debates, within this larger framework that encompasses a variety of temporal and spatial configurations. Thus, for this study, which covers an 84-year period (1880 – 1964), the debates that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s are of extreme interest as they on the one hand somehow highlighted the highest stage of a process that had already been ongoing for many decades, and on the other framed questions that would characterise the future scholarship, globally, for several decades.

## ***Conclusion***



This chapter offered an overview of Latin American urban geographies by taking into account, on the one hand, the crucial importance of cities in shaping the postcolonial space and, on the other, discussing the emergence of 'the urban' as a theoretical category that exceeds the mere physical manifestation of the urban settlement. Thus, while cities have been crucial in the articulation of national geographies, and particularly capital cities as centres from which postcolonial power has been organised and strengthened, even so, in the second part of the twentieth century, the role of urbanisation began to be seen as a totalising process that was transforming Latin American society as a whole. As a result of Dependency theorists' investigations, this theoretical insight offered an important view from the peripheries of the global system and, simultaneously, challenged Western theories' hegemony.

Very importantly, within Dependency theorists' work, the relationship between urban and rural space was not conceived as a dual relationship spatialising the modern (urban)/ traditional (rural) relationship, as in modernisation theories. On the contrary, the complexity of this relationship, as well as the power of the urban, was seen on multiple scale, from that of global capitalism's geopolitical asymmetries, to that of (the resulting) regional and national socio-economic processes. Especially through Quijano's contributions, *dependentistas* showed surprising similarities with the coeval work of Henri Lefebvre. This connection reveals how the urban question was a worldwide process and how this was originally articulated depending on the (geo-political) *location* of its production. In this direction, although implicitly, Dependency theorists' work anticipated to some extent Postcolonial critique and its claim for non-Eurocentric knowledge by encouraging a *spatial shift* in the very creation of theory.

To sum up, the debates within Dependency theory are of extreme importance for several reasons. Crucially, they represent an apogee of the 'urban enigma' that has tormented Latin America since the end of the nineteenth century. Starting with positivist considerations of the urban at the turn of the century (see chapter 4), decade by decade urbanisation began to invade Latin American society along with its dark aspects – such as impoverishment, marginalisation and social exclusion. If the thorny elements of this question clearly emerged in the 1970s, it will be important to see its genealogy during the previous decades; that is to say, how these processes of urban transformation were accompanied by different conceptualisations and narratives around the modernisation of national projects.

On a broader perspective, as is well-known in the case of Lefebvre, Dependency theorists also anticipated contemporary debates about capitalist urbanisation and its main issues. In order to explore these questions in the context of each of the three capital cities focused on by this research, the following chapter will outline some methodological strategies and limits. Elements such as the considerable span of time covered by the research and the diversity of the cases under examination require specific reflections on the ways in which this work is able to offer a helpful lens through which to see how the 'urban enigma' was understood and narrated in Latin America throughout those decades.

## CHAPTER 3. Methodological Considerations

### *Introduction*

This chapter discusses the methodological elements of the research. The approach of investigating three (capital) cities, and diachronically, raises many methodological questions, especially in relation to how these cases can be discussed together. The main aim of this work is to explore the articulation of Latin America's postcolonial geographies by stressing important changes that occurred to some of its most iconic capital cities; despite this triple viewpoint, the project is not carried out as a comparison in a strict sense. The research instead explores the different temporalities of postcolonial time, discussing how they materialised in the shapes of the urban environment. The cases are isolated from the complexity of Latin American space and are analysed separately in each chapter; however, they are understood in relational terms, rather than in isolation from the rest of the national and regional context.

As discussed in the previous chapter, cities are difficult to define theoretically, especially as from the beginning of the twentieth century their socio-political geography progressively extended well beyond their physical expression. In this regard, a comparative analysis poses several questions in relation to factors such as, and above all, the socio-historical specificities that give each city a sort of unique socio-spatial significance. The method of *relational comparison* (Hart 2006, 2016) offers valuable elements to address such a question, as spatio-historical components play a major role in the complex task of comparing urban elements. More specifically, in relation to this research, the comparative move consists in

exploring how each of three cases under analysis represented and materialised a different national project. Therefore, urban transformations are used as a lens to explore, and compare, socio-political transformations across the postcolonial period. It is precisely in this way that the research aims to see how such significantly diverse figures participated in what is considered the same process, that is, the production of postcolonial Latin America.

In order to critically (re)construct this picture, the empirical work has been carried out by taking into account the power of the archive and its inevitable influence on the historian's narration. The state being the main actor in each of the three cases, the sources analysed are mostly coming, directly or indirectly, from its sphere. Policymakers' speeches and writings, national magazines, daily newspapers, and architectural journals are among the main documents that were collected in physical and digital archives. Reflecting upon questions concerning the multiple geographies of power that were at stake in doing the archival work, this chapter provides an outline of the main strategies, challenges and issues that have characterised the making of this research.

### ***Towards Relational Comparison***

Questions concerning the difficulties in defining the city enhance the comparative challenge to find convincing solutions to this epistemological issue. An interesting and original contribution in this sense is offered by the notion of *relational comparison* (Hart 2006, 2016; Ward 2010). This comparative strategy aims to overcome the problems coming from the objectivization of the city in favour of a more open and articulated

conceptualisation which sheds more light on the specific relationships marking each urban configuration.

Among the attempts to avoid this epistemological division of the world – such as the split along the Global North/Global South lines – the school of *comparative urbanism* concentrated its attention upon relationships and similarities between cities across the globe (Nijman, 2007; Robinson, 2011, 2015). In particular, Jennifer Robinson stressed the importance of focusing on “the spatiality of cities themselves, their multiplicity, diversity and connectedness” in order “to suggest ways to recast the methodological foundations of a comparative approach to urban studies, particularly inherited assumptions about causality and what constitutes a unit of analysis” (Robinson 2011: 2). At the heart of what she calls *the comparative gesture* there is the idea of finding common features whereby it is possible to study the urban environment (Robinson 2011, 2015). Moreover, as Robinson noted (Robinson 2011), the comparative method can be carried out in many ways. For example, the *individualising* approach aimed to find one city’s unique features and specificities in relation to other cities. The *encompassing* method instead tried to highlight how all cities are substantially the product of a global capitalist process, viewing them as single elements constituting parts of the global engine. Furthermore, the *variation-finding* strategy consisted in looking for differences within a generally limited group of cities located in the same geographical area. These approaches aim to understand the city from multiple angles without falling into the Eurocentric trap of considering specific (Euro-American) cases as leading examples within the comparative move (see chapter 2).

Gillian Hart brings further depth to comparative analysis by specifying that “rejecting any notion of pre-given ‘cases’ or variants of a presumed universal/general process, relational comparison focuses instead on *spatio-historical specificities* as well as interconnections and mutually

constitutive processes – crucial to which is the non-teleological, open conception of dialectics” (Hart 2016: 373, emphasis added). This approach allows us to think significantly differently, and quite originally, of an object of study in comparative terms. First, there is not any established model to look for and then to apply when investigating each distinct case. The logic underpinning this understanding is that spatial and temporal components are too important to be overlooked – if not entirely eliminated in the most radical cases – by means of a universal theoretical generalisation. Second, and equally important, each element is understood within an array of constitutive relations to others, that is, through dialectical connections whereby elements reciprocally influence and shape each other. Finally, as Hart notably stressed, the totality of these relations does not imply a complete understanding of the object, as there is a sort of constant circularity and permanent incompleteness of the process which does not allow, as it does in the Hegelian approach, to any final definition (I will come back on this latter point later).

Spanning nearly a century, this investigation touches three crucial points across Latin America and explores them at different periods in time. As mentioned in the introduction, the overlaps between these periods are seen as *transitions* in which important changes in the urban environment, in terms of urban planning and architectural style, can normally be considered as tendencies occurring across the majority of the Latin American space. Of course, it would be misleading to conceive these changes as something linear and equally spread throughout the countries. There are discrepancies and deep differences; social, economic and political situations generated and, at the same time, were reflected in the diverse configurations of the urban environment. However, it is possible to point out the presence of some common patterns that not only represented the occurrence of cultural and political conditions on a regional level but, more importantly,

manifested the countries' strong desire to place themselves in a prominent position on the global map.

Hart sees the relational comparison approach as a way of practising a *Marxist postcolonial geography* (Hart 2016). It is Marxist in that the author builds her understanding of dialectic starting from Marx's and Lefebvre's considerations on the topic. What is particularly important to stress here is precisely this definition of dialectic that, among other factors, is defined through the differentiation between *elements* and *processes* according to a "principle" asserting that "elements, things, and structures do not exist prior to the processes and relations that create, sustain, or undermine them" (Hart 2016: 378). As will be explained in more detail shortly, this research consists in actually reconstructing the nature (for nature I mean here the *reasons behind*) of the processes that participated in the transformation of the urban environment. Instead of comparing the elements as such, eventually, I compare the postcolonial processes that, among many other things, contributed to the often contradictory production of these elements.

Within this context, more specifically, I look at how these iconic transformations of capital cities were strategically used as tools in order to modernise and at the same time to show the modernisation of each country. As well as modernity, modernisation can mean many things but, as discussed in Chapter 1, it is very unlikely that it can be separated from the whole of colonial history, in terms of both its discourses and practices (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992; Dussel 1995; Mignolo 2000). Thus, in the wake of this fundamental assumption, this study investigates the multiple ways in which the "postcolonial condition" (Mezzadra and Rahola 2006) was produced. This was a condition that, despite its spatio-temporal variety and despite the internal multiplicity, relied on the city – and more generally on urbanisation as a whole – to dictate and represent its rules. At the same time, urbanisation, despite its high level of significance, was only *one* of the

channels through which the *postcolonial* was enacted; for example, as many studies have shown over recent decades, crucial works in this sense were carried out by looking at literature, historiography, philosophy, cartography, and so forth (see Chapter 1). Alongside the particular interest of the period under analysis in terms of urban growth, this is another reason why there is specific attention paid here to the enigmas underlying these urban transformations, as the urban represented *a way* –very important but still one among many others – through which the ruling elites re-organised the postcolonial state.

Thus, the main aim of this study is not to compare the cities' transformations in a strict physical sense, but rather how each country imagined and materialised the ideas of modernisation on the terrain of their capital city's urban environment. The web that is constructed between the three cases passes through ideas and discourses concerning the postcolonial modernisation of the countries in a way that, starting from the city, then expands over that national space. The comparative move here consists therefore in analysing and connecting the *national projects* that contributed to producing, despite their differences and contradictions, the multifaceted postcolonial space known as 'Latin America'.

Nevertheless, in carrying out such work there are always elements that are left out. For example, as I anticipated in the introduction and will discuss in more detail when commenting on my archival work, in contrast to many methods proposed by postcolonial and decolonial thinkers, I have generally left out the elements of *resistance* that tried to contest these processes promoted from *above*. This is not to say that in my understanding the city is only a place of representation; on the contrary, it is a place that is permanently and constitutively *at stake*, as much of the literature I have referred to strongly stresses (for example, Lefebvre 2003 [1970], Castells 1977). The decision to look only at this part of the story was due to the



intention to catch some movements of the postcolonial state within specific spatio-temporal frameworks and highlight their internal contradictions.

In this regard, it is again helpful to recall Hart's considerations about the meaning of the *relational*, when she points out that the relational is "dialectical, but not in the way most people think of dialectics as a teleological Hegelian monster slouching inexorably towards an appalling totalitarian 'totality' that imposes uniformity on heterogeneity" (Hart 2016: 372). The way in which I understand this non-teleological structure is that any combination of processes never results in a picture which is fully defined. Likewise, this research does not, and cannot, pretend to be wholly exhaustive and inevitably congruent; on the contrary, inherently, it somehow silences discrepancies that in various ways also contributed to the historical production of the Latin American space. This implies the impossibility of reaching any completeness and, at the same time, the aim to disintegrate the alleged unity of the historical account (Foucault 1984: 87).

As a result, the cities here under examination remain permanently suspended between their physical expression, the nationalist ideas that they had to embody, and the social relations that produced, contradicted, and exceeded them. For these several reasons, the three cases are conceived through this relational approach that is then explored in comparative terms by seeing how each case, along with its similarities and divergences, consisted in a specific articulation of the Latin American postcolonial figure.

### *The Power of the Archives*

In order to reconstruct the central ideas underlying the transformations under examination, this research looks at archival material such as newspapers, magazines, architectural journals, and collections memoirs.

Preliminary, it is essential to take into account the cultural and ideological context from which this material emerged, and then reconstruct the parts of the narratives that are seen as crucial for the aims of the research. However, first of all it is necessary to underline how archival research is approached.

Archives – and, in consequence, history – are not conceived here as objective and unsusceptible to any specific influence. The archive is not viewed as a sort of container of unique and indisputable historical truth. On the contrary, archives inevitably express a political dimension (Mills 2013: 703) as well as power relations that should always be problematically at stake when accessing them. The *partiality* which unavoidably marks any archive is a fact that represents a constant contradiction to research as it offers a limited and asymmetrical range of options. For example, most archives collect ‘mainstream’ sources, namely those coming from governmental institutions, and the media and publication of the social elite. Of course, this is particularly true when we go back in time, that is, in periods in which the production of alternative sources was probably much smaller and far less likely to have been preserved. I experienced this issue directly at the very beginning of my research when I started to work on the case of Buenos Aires. Initially, one of my aims was to trace the counter-narratives which attempted to criticise or resist these processes of transformation. In this sense, I wanted to look for documents that I thought of as “fragments”, “objects”, or even “ghosts” (Mills 2013) that were able to stress the asymmetries between the official sources and the precariousness of others not aligned with the dominant discourse. However, during my archival research I soon realised that to undertake such a task would require such a greater amount of time (and funding) that it was thus not realistic to include those viewpoints alongside, and against, the official narratives.

The intrinsic fragmentation and unbalance of archives makes it particularly hard to find what Ranajit Guha famously described as the

“small voices of history” (Guha 1994) – voices that are normally left out from the mainstream narrations provoking, as a result, the in *invisibilisation* of the subaltern subject. Such a different angle of investigation could be one of this study’s possible directions for future research. In any case, this fact reopens – from another perspective – the political problem of the archive by attempting to find the voices of subjects which have usually been ‘forgotten’ in the traditional historical narratives. Once again, it is possible to understand any archive as well as the very archival research as a precise and conscious stance, historically and geographically – and not least politically – allocated: “as the conceptualization of the nature of science has evolved, ‘objectivity’ has been increasingly understood in terms of ‘situated knowledge’ or ‘partial perspective’ – or context” (Schwartz and Cook 2002: 9).

Archives are powerful machines in shaping *time*. The idea of collecting documents that act as a memory of specific historical periods makes the archive a place in which past and present are simultaneously at stake. Given this contradiction, working with the archive consists in disarticulating this double temporality and organising sources in a way in which the historical narration considers the problem of “epistemic habits”, that is, the existence of “ways of knowing that are available and ‘easy to think’, called-upon, temporarily settled dispositions that can be challenged and that change” (Stoler 2009: 39). In such way, working in the archives signifies the constant risk of considering knowledge a finite and determined fact, namely a coherent totality of sources that historians need merely to collect.

Such an idea of time characterising archives makes instead crucial the articulation – and disarticulation – of the postcolonial. In exploring primary sources produced in the countries under investigation, I soon realised how the postcolonial was interiorised and reproduced through

those documents. I will discuss the choice of specific voices in the archive later in the chapter; for now, I would like to anticipate that the understanding of time within documents coming from governments and the press was in line with Western/colonial habits. To confirm how little change occurred on an internal level in the passage from the colonial to the post-independence period<sup>37</sup>, elites' discourses about past and future are marked by a constant referral to Europe and the United States as main references. As will be discussed in detail in the empirical chapters, the naturalisation of the colonial conquest, or in any case its emancipatory role, marked these discourses (alongside a structural cancellation of Latin America's precolonial past) and rendered the archive a place that is situated in the West. The overwhelming presence of documents produced in Spanish and Portuguese and mostly by the countries' non-indigenous populations, stresses the controversies of the historical narration and its inevitable location within colonial power relations. This element undoubtedly shaped my research. Although I used the archival material not just as mere sources confirming the dominant narratives but on order to highlight of moments of crisis within their alleged linearity (Stoler 2009: 32-33), I was not able to address the problem of situating my work within the combination of power and knowledge that I thought (and still think) was the target of my critique. Nonetheless, working in the archive allowed me to further reflect upon the incessant making of postcolonial time. Actions of document purchase (see next section), collection and analysis, create a circularity in the production of historical knowledge that is unlikely able to escape the reproduction of postcolonial relationships.

Having said that, archives are "social constructs" (Schwartz & Cook 2002: 3) and, as such, they are profoundly *unstable*. This gives historians the

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<sup>37</sup> Klor de Alva claimed that it is not even possible to talk about 'postcolonialism' in Latin America as nothing changed socially – that is, in terms of subjugation of the indigenous populations – with the end of colonialism (Klor de Alva 1992, 1995).

opportunity to interfere actively in the political work of historical narration. Instead of being unchangeable substance surviving the passage of time, archival material is something *alive* and is permanently transforming over time. Historical geographers have the task of continuously “animating” (Dwyer and Davies 2010) this complex and multifaceted substance. If the task is successful, it implies the re-animation the historical narration. But not only this. Once again, the crucial point is that history is indissolubly tied to a present that, by means of its philosophy, political thought and sensitivity, contributes continuously to the reshaping of the understanding of past.

Archives highlight a dialectical relationship that constitutively links the configuration of power relations with the shaping of a knowledge that inevitably embraces the whole articulation of historical narration and its subjective dimension. Hence, it is crucial to underscore that archives “wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies” (Schwartz and Cook 2002: 2). For this reason, once again, postcolonial time acts as something that is not merely linear (in the sense of a centre/periphery line) but is instead in continuous and complex re-articulation.

Within this research, the specific periods and places investigated are taken as strategic points of view, some of those that are crucial to the making of postcolonial time in Latin America. Finally, it is not the task of finding the truth or falsehood of any sort of knowledge in question, it is rather the attempt to carefully reflect upon the fact that “the truth of knowledge is established under conditions that have a lot to do with power” (Crampton and Krygier 2005: 14): thus, the task of the historian consists in uncovering these conditions and mapping them out in order to (dis)place the historical within other geographies of power.

## *Accessing History*

The decision to do research on three capital cities had entailed, since its very beginning, the challenge of carrying out good archival work. When I presented the outline of the project in conferences and workshops in my department, I was often told that such a task was too ambitious, in the sense that it would be very difficult to build sufficient material for the three cases. However, I had the conviction that what my project needed was not 'hidden' or barely known documents; the plan was to look at the discourses and narratives that characterised topical moments of urban transformation. Nonetheless, those observations were extremely helpful as they caused me to constantly think with some concern about the archival work and I began to look for material much earlier than the 'fieldwork' that normally takes place in the second year.

The first part of the archival research was fairly complicated and I had to change direction many times. During first year of the PhD the research design was already clear, in the sense that I had chosen the three cities and each period of investigation given the specificities that marked each of them; however, the selection of the buildings to investigate required significant work that was mostly carried out in the actual archives. To begin with, I built a landscape of the most important cases of urban transformation characterising each city in the period under investigation. This part of the work took place mostly at IAI in Berlin, where I had the opportunity to access a significant number of secondary sources that described the history of the three cities in the period of investigation.

I started to accurately explore the historical sources I regularly found in the first books and articles I accessed, therefore accessing iconic material

in relation to each city's specific period. The fact of having done this part of the work in archives gave me a relatively easy chance to find the sources I was interested in. Sometimes the sources were overly descriptive and were not providing the kind of information I was looking for; that is, in addition to general information about social, political, and structural conditions of the city, I wanted to understand the ways the cities transformed during the period under analysis. However, I began to see that academic literature, especially the most recent, was often referring to some key works that looked like – and in fact actually were – essential reading for a global understanding of the main features and issues of these cities at that time.

To give some important examples (the following lists are ordered by publication year), as regards Buenos Aires I explored works by Ortíz (1968, 1988), Sargent (1974), Scobie (1974), Socolow (1991), Gutman and Hardoy (1992), Gutiérrez (2002), and Vázquez Rial (1996); as regards Mexico City those by Kemper and Royce (1981), Trillo (1996), Méndez-Vigatá (1997), Lear (1998), Ward (1998) Olsen (2008), Krieger (2006), Carranza (2010), Burian (1997), Collado Herrera (2003), and López and Rochfort (2006); as regards Brasília those by Holford (1962), Evenson (1973), Wright and Turkienicz (1988), Holston (1989), Scott (1998), Caldeira and Holston (2005), Cavalcanti (2005), El-Dahdah (2005), Cornish (1991), De Holanda (et al. 2002), Williams (2007), Beal (2010) and Stierli (2013).

This material helped me not only to draw a more detailed picture of the cities of interest, but also began to give me some indications and hypotheses about some specific episodes of urban transformation that I could then analyse in detail (as I will explain here below). In addition to this, I accessed many urban maps in the archives in order to see how the transformations were represented and narrated. Although I eventually used maps only in Chapter 4, that part of the work was a helpful

opportunity to think of the changes in the urban environment in a more detailed way<sup>38</sup>.

Then, after having built the landscape of the cities under examination, I began to retrace the particular histories in order to find within each case an episode that was iconic for the socio-political project under investigation. As the aim of the thesis is to look at state narratives about modernisation, this stage of research concerned the identification of projects of construction or renovation of the urban environment that were able to encapsulate most of the features marking the ruling elites' national mission. The main problem was that of abundance. As stressed in the previous chapters, the urban was one of the prominent places in which modernisation was at stake and this signified the ruling elites' constant efforts to demonstrate an actual achievement of modernity through iconic projects of urban transformation, a fact that was particularly evident in capital cities given their function as metonymic spaces of representation. Thus, each case offered a significant number of projects that were able to provide good insights into each country's period, and my choice was driven

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<sup>38</sup> Maps are obviously important tools that allow us to monitor progressively the extension of cities' physical transformation. However, when investigating colonial and postcolonial landscapes, reflections upon maps are inevitable. As many authors convincingly stressed, maps were normally viewed as 'neutral' and 'scientific' forms of representation (Crampton 2009; Crampton and Krygier 2005; Harley 1989; Livingstone 1993; Wood and Fels 1992). On the contrary, mapping consisted of a strong and efficient (due to its alleged neutrality) powerful colonial tool. As Jacobs pointed out, "the role of the spatial imaginary in the imperial project is perhaps more clearly evident in the spatial practices of mapping and naming" (Jacobs 2006: 19). Very similar colonial activities consisted in re-naming places and roads as well as building monuments in order to hegemonise values and memories. Thus, in the case of cities, maps indicate not only the physical changes which occurred in the urban spaces, but also, through the 'simple' act of naming, the sedimentation (or renovation) of colonial and postcolonial powers and resistances. In this sense, maps are incredible objects able to represent the coeval articulations of power and knowledge (thinking of, for example, who produced the map and what is represented on it). As critical cartography stresses, maps are always situated "within specific relations of power" and they are everything but "neutral scientific documents" (Crampton and Krygier 2005: 12). These power relations are particularly relevant when it comes to thinking about the relations between urban space and state power. Lastly, to note that, with regard to the period investigated in this research, the production of maps was mostly under the control of the state, and this means that these are further documents in which it is possible to reflect upon the relationship between the ruling elites, urban configuration, and production of national identity.



by the intention to find a building that was able to summarise both the tendency of the architectural transformations at that time and the ruling elites' modernising vision. Of course, these two elements were deeply intertwined and they often materialised across the urban environment. For example, with regard to Buenos Aires, the planning of squares and avenues such as Plaza de Mayo (1884) and Avenida de Mayo (1894) the construction of buildings such as the Jockey Club's headquarters (1897), Palacio Fernández Anchorena (1907), and Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones (1928) were aptly able to contain some important features of the elites' national project, one that considered French identity to be at the core of their hegemonic narrative.

The identification of these buildings signified an initial work in the archive that aimed to collect primary sources in order to see on the one hand the material available and on the other the 'nature' of the discourse around it; in other words, to what extent did each project interpret the ruling elites' plan? More specifically, considering the thesis's research questions, to what extent did each project *simultaneously* embrace crucial dimensions for the postcolonial state such as rural-urban dynamics, ideas about national population, and geopolitical elements? Having this in mind, and, by exploring material such as architectural journals and magazines, I came across the aforementioned episodes of urban renovation as well as others and, keeping the focus on the case of Buenos Aires, I eventually decided that a building such as the Argentine Pavilion was able powerfully to contain the elements that my investigation was looking for. The selected building was thus seen as a strategical lens to explore the multiple dimensions and contradictions of Argentina's postcolonial project at that time. Such a logical structure characterised the research of the other two architectural transformations too.

With regard to Mexico City, I mainly focused on buildings such as the Palace of Public Education (1922), Estadio Nacional (1923), Escuela Benito Juárez (1925), Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera's house (1931), and Monumento a la Revolución (1938). In this case, I had been thinking of the Palace of Public Education since the very beginning as it immediately attracted my attention due to the ambitious post-revolutionary project that characterised the renovation of the building led by Vasconcelos. However, at the beginning of my investigation, I proceeded with a preliminary exploration of the aforementioned projects in order to understand their potential grasp of what I named above the 'multiple dimensions' of the postcolonial. Moreover, although Mexico City's period of investigation spanned a forty-year period (1920-1960) I decided to concentrate the research for an iconic project within the early post-revolutionary period. This is mainly due to two intertwined reasons. First, despite the divergent historical interpretations, the years following the revolution surely represented a crucial moment for Mexican history in which the energy of the revolution was often forcefully expressed in Mexico City's urban transformations. This is to say that the radical project of social change – which had a strong influence across the whole of Latin America at that time – materialised in specific urban forms and narratives that were particularly evident in the 1920s and partly in the 1930s. Second, as a result of this first consideration, the architectural tendencies that marked the 1940s and 1950s in Mexico City reflected the rapid weakening of the revolutionary forces and, at the same time, architectural modernism began successfully to spread within Mexico as well as across Latin America more widely. Such a further architectural stage corresponded to a likewise different socio-political moment that marked Latin America's post-war period (the developmentalist stage) – of course within a context marked by discrepancies, it was not a perfectly linear process. This latter period is here investigated through the case of Brasília. Thus, even though the research

takes into account Mexico City from 1920 to 1960, I believed it to be of significant interest to focus on a transformation that occurred within the first two decades of the post-colonial period, a period whose socio-political goals and ambitions had progressively abated in the 1940s and 1950s until coming to an unconfutable end with the arrival of the 1960s (see discussion in chapter 5).

With regard to the episode of Brasília, the selection of the specific urban form faced different issues. First of all, while each case investigated is marked by a relatively long period of time, that of Brasília is by far the shortest (I discussed the reasons for this choice earlier in the Introduction), the challenge here was not to choose a building that was able to be convincingly representative of the national project. As the city was built according to a radical and fully homogeneous architectural project, potentially any building could be viewed as highly representative of such an ambitious idea of socio-political renovation. In this sense, paradoxically, the choice was not easy. I started focusing on Brasília's unique urban planning. I considered the project of the Monumental Axis that worked as a backbone within the urban design; moreover, my attention was captured by the large residential blocks called Superquadras due to their role of basic geometrical unity that articulated the socio-spatial idea of the city. On the other hand, the architectural aspects offered several symbolic buildings that marked the concepts of the Pilot Plan such as, above all, the National Congress, the Ministry of External Relations (Itamaraty Palace) and the official residence of the President (Alvorada Palace). These buildings were not only strictly part of Brasília's design, they were also the product of the same mind, that is, the architect Oscar Niemeyer. Reflecting upon Brasília's lines and shapes, I explored documents concerning their ideation in the archives (such as, for example, interviews and planners' memoirs) until eventually I decided to focus on the construction of the National Congress along with what can be considered its pedestal, the Three Powers Plaza. The

final decision was the consequence of the fact that it involved elements of both urban planning and architecture. On the one hand, the National Congress was the most representative building of Brazil's new democracy (from which came the decision to make the Congress the tallest building of the Pilot Plan); on the other hand Three Powers Plaza separated, both physically and conceptually, the three most important powers of the country (the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary), a division that indicated the primary condition for a modern democracy. This choice made me able to analyse, in addition to the articulation of internal/national elements, the connection to larger geopolitical debates that, during that period, crucially involved discussions about democracy and development in the so-called 'Third World'.

Thus, the choice of the specific building I selected for each city was made at a primary stage of archival work. I explored the archives in different ways during the many steps of my research. In general terms, at the beginning of each case – during the first stage of general exploration of documents and the search for a specific case of transformation that I have just described – I accessed sources that were able to offer me a wide understanding of the city and its main historical events. Sources such as architectural journals, magazines, or collections of memoirs. This helped me to get a better idea of the debates on the themes of my interests and it especially made me able to understand whether the discussion about the mentioned buildings actually involved the three key themes of this research, that is, the rural/urban dimension, the debate about national population, and the geopolitical scale. As a result, the first set of material I examined functioned as a guide for the following stages of research.

This part of archival work was significant important for two reasons. First, it gave me a wider understanding of the topic of interest by listening to some *voices* of the main protagonists and by discovering also

controversies within those discourses and unexpected comments from people whose ideas I assumed to be – perhaps naively – more consistent. For example, as will be stressed in the empirical chapters, Vasconcelos and Rivera's ideas were not coinciding despite the long crucial collaboration they had in the renovation of the Palace of Public Education (see chapter 5); similarly, Niemeyer disagreed with many of Kubitschek's political views (see chapter 6). However, at the same time, this allowed me to understand the primary importance that was given to those projects of urban transformation in which, regardless of any ideological differences, there was the strong belief that such changes were inevitable for national progress. Second, conversely, this stage of archival work was helpful also for finding patterns that were effectively more linear; for example, the modernist tone of many magazines even when they did not talk about subjects directly related to urban transformations.

Thus, I realised the existence within this material of a positivist and consistent perception that the 'modern' world was about to arrive in magazines on literature, technology, and music. This happened particularly working on the material concerning Buenos Aires and Brasília; in both cases the main narrative was substantially in line with the idea of 'catching up' with Euro-American modernity. This reflects the political environment of each country in the period analysed: although for different political reasons (see Chapters 4 and 6), in both cases the ruling elites believed in the necessity of reaching Western socio-economic standards. On the contrary, in post-revolutionary Mexico City the revolution empowered the peasantry and created a situation in which, despite the contradictions, the improvement of conditions in the countryside was thought of as taking priority over technological/industrial modernising promises.

The central stage of archival work consisted in accessing more specific material in relation to each episode I decided to examine. As well

as during the first stage, this phase of research was not always successful. On the contrary, although in this case the specificity of the documents required meant, potentially, better chances to find accurate information, once I accessed the actual documents the result was very often rather disappointing. On the one hand I was able to 'isolate' the voices I was interested in such as, for instance, finding newspapers and magazines commenting on the events under examination or architects' and politicians' relevant interviews, yet, the actual content was frequently technical or merely descriptive and did not concern the research's specific themes. More specifically, despite the fact that the information may have been interesting, it did not directly involve key themes such as the rural/urban dimension, ideas about the national population, and geopolitical concerns. Of course, as I have explained above, when I chose the specific episodes during the first stage of research, I was aware of the fact that they strongly involved the relevant themes (this was a necessary requirement for my choice), however when it came to finding more detailed information within the voices of the archives the task was significantly harder. I am going to explain in the next section the criteria and methods that marked this central phase of archival work.

### *Criteria and Methods for Selecting Primary Sources*

The first step to take at this stage of archival work, was to interrogate the actors who promoted the projects of urban change. In this regard, the ruling elites were those who felt the necessity to enact significant transformations as a result of the modernising desires that defined their period within the national institutions. I use the expression 'ruling elite' (instead of, for example, 'ruling class') in order to stress how the subjects leading the post-colonial nations in Latin America normally belonged to (or were tied to) the

groups that organised the independence movements (see chapter 2). That is to say, in addition to being at the top of the social scale in economic terms, they were strongly defined by their European lineage, specifically by a strong racial element. In other words, while the definition of class focuses more on socio-economic components (and might as a result be problematic in contexts such as post-independence Latin America), that of elites allows me to underline the racial composition in spite of, in Marx's terms, the internal division of labour and power that defines social classes (see, for example, Ollman 1968; Resnick and Wolff 1987).

In terms of decision-making processes, the ruling elites (in relation to this concept in Latin America see Lipset and Solari 1967; Burns and Skidmore 2014) were the absolute protagonists of iconic transformations in capital cities; therefore, in relation to sources, I collected voices coming from the elites' environment such as national newspapers, popular magazines, government reports, politicians' speeches and books, architectural journals and architects' published interviews and reflections. These documents allowed me to see how the projects under analysis were prefigured, described, and eventually commented upon. As has been stressed in the introduction, during the period analysed the state was the main actor carrying out urban transformations. This of course occurred in contradictory ways as, for example, many times the urban environment changed without state consensus, such as in the case of the spread of informal settlements. However, the idea of transforming the city depending on the ruling elites' idea of modernisation and progress was undoubtedly prominent in the case of representative transformations in capital cities – places in which national values were strongly symbolised (see chapter 2).

I therefore reflected meticulously upon what kinds of primary sources would have been particularly helpful in answering my research questions and, accordingly, how then I could have selected them. Once the

kind of voices I was looking for had been established – that is, those produced by the ruling elites and therefore, those which were closely associated to the state (given the strong hegemony that elites exerted at a state level during the periods under analysis) – I began to think of the specific documents to access and, very importantly, how to find them. I chose different sources depending on the case; this was the result of a specific research goal, that is, highlighting the voice of the elites. This fact raised many questions in relation to how best to shape this voice through historical sources, a question about what documents would better help achieve that in a satisfactory way. My main question was: what is the most indicative source that best represents the ruling elite's voice?

The answer was obviously not an easy one. As I discussed in the Introductory chapter, the elites spoke in multiple ways and through multiple means. Governments, politicians, technicians, state apparatuses, mainstream newspapers and magazines were among the most important sources within which that voice could be detected and analysed. Hence, I decided to provide a picture of the *multiplicity* of this voice – that is of course not linear within itself – and searched different sources in each case investigated. At this stage, as I explained above, the choice of the building to investigate had already been made, so the question was to determine what kind of sources were more apt (as well as possible to access) to explore each episode of urban transformation.

To begin with, I started with the episode of Buenos Aires. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, this was the only case in which I had carried out preliminary research to understand whether it was possible to contrast the voice of the elite with that those that had resisted the change. Therefore, I had a relative familiarity with the material available. As this case is built upon three events (national and international exhibitions) that I defined as crucial for the life of the Argentine Pavilion, I thought that the



national press was a particularly illustrative source to analyse the tone the elites used to accompany these manifestations. Thus, I largely searched for mainstream national press sources such as newspapers and popular magazines.

Among the most important daily newspapers that could clearly be associated with the voice of the elites at that time were *La Prensa* and *La Nación*. I accessed single issues of *La Prensa* in microfilm at the British Library, looking for the issues published in the specific days and months under analysis. As regards *La Nación*, I could not find issues published within the period of my interest in European archives (for example, the British Library had its issues from 1872 to 1882 and from 1917 to 1998) and therefore I decided not to include this in the research. I decided instead to look for the very popular magazine *Caras y Caretas*, a weekly publication printed in Buenos Aires. Contrary to the abovementioned daily newspapers, *Caras Y Caretas* was defined by a friendly and often humoristic tone (it was published from 1898 to 1941 and then again from 2005 to the present) but, at the same time, when engaging with national questions the magazine normally assumed a strong nationalist and serious voice clearly in line with the ruling elites. I found the items published in the period of interest in the digital library (*Hemeroteca Digital*) part of the National Library of Spain (see details in bibliography); this constituted an important source to view how the elite articulated the discourse using a more popular and sometimes almost informal language. Finally, in order to add a voice more directly ascribable to the government, I acceded government reports and, thinking particularly of the 1889 International Exposition in Paris, which was only infrequently and vaguely covered by Argentine newspapers, I found the official report written by the Argentine delegates at the Exposition (Alcorta 1890a, 1890b). This was extremely helpful, as in addition to the details of the events that were occurring in Paris, it describes the whole (governmental) logic behind the construction of the Pavilion,

from the architectural style used to its decoration (including also a part written by Albert Ballu [1890], the architect who designed the structure). I found this report, which is made up of two large tomes, in IAI in Berlin. The other primary sources I used in the chapter on Buenos Aires came from searching words in digital catalogues (see the details below) and from indications in secondary sources.

In the case of Mexico City, I adopted a different strategy. As the building under examination was a governmental institution, I concentrated the collection of sources on important figures that were part of the government and those who contributed to the architectural and aesthetic discourse of the Palace of Public Education. Above all, I looked at the figures of José Vasconcelos and Diego Rivera. Vasconcelos was specifically the voice that attracted my interest as he was a crucial figure in intellectual, cultural and political terms during the first post-revolutionary period; in addition to this, he directed the work of renovating the palace and was the Ministry of Education during those years. Hence, I found this figure to be of extreme important in understanding that project of urban transformation in relation to the post-revolutionary national project. I searched for Vasconcelos' essays, discourses and literary texts by using search words in the digital catalogues (see below) and well as by following some thematic references in secondary sources (to give some examples: Vasconcelos 1997 [1995], 1926, 1927, 1934, 1959, 1972 [1963]).

I accessed the material required and explored Vasconcelos' works with the goal of uncovering and highlighting the main ideas and concepts that marked the national project articulated in the renovation of the palace. I found most of this material in the British Library. In addition to that, I explored the publications of the Ministry of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública [1922, 1923a, 1923b, 1924a, 1924b, 1984]) in the period in which Vasconcelos was minister (I found this material mostly at IAI in

Berlin); in so doing, I was able to offer a further gaze on the multiple voices of the elite by adding what came directly from the state. In the same token, I searched material about Rivera and specifically that in relation to the works he carried out in the palace. In addition to a large selection of pictures of the murals he painted in the interior of the palace (which I found both physically and online by search words in digital catalogues) I also found Rivera's voice in published interviews (for example, Suárez 1962) and in comments of his own work (Rivera 1929).

With regard to Brasília, my goal was to analyse the idea of building a new capital city in relation to transforming the national identity, as well as the social environment, of Brazil. Hence, given also the radicality of the modernist architectural project that defined the city, I was mostly interested in exploring the discourse of those who were the actual protagonists of this futuristic project. Hence, first of all I looked for material by and about Juscelino Kubitschek, that is, the president who invested his political mission in the construction of the new capital city. Starting from looking at secondary sources, I then began to explore documents where Kubitschek directly spoke about the reasons and ideas that made him decide to build Brasília. By using search words in electronic catalogues, as well as by being directed by some secondary sources and exploring architectural magazines (see below), I was able to find and analyse articles, speeches and books by the president in periods before, during and after the construction of Brasília (for example, Kubitschek 1957, 1958a, 1958b, 1962, 2000 [1975]).

Moreover, following this path, I was interested in how the employment of 'expert knowledge' was related to this ambitious project. This meant investigating the technicians' conceptions and discourses and seeing how they were related to Kubitschek's project. First and foremost, the two major figures in this area are Lucio Costa, the architect and planner who designed the radical plan of Brasília, and Oscar Niemeyer, who was

responsible for the most iconic building in the new capital city. I looked for material such as drawings, interviews and books written by the two modernist figures. I therefore collected, by using search words as well as indications from secondary sources, words and works that could explain Costa's and Niemeyer's specific choices (for instance, Costa 1957, 1991 [1957]; Niemeyer 1957, 1961). I found most of these sources at IAI in Berlin. In addition to these sources, of particular importance in this sense was the magazine *Brasília*: as is suggested in the name, the magazine illustrated and commented on the construction of the new capital city from its very conception; it started being published in January 1957. The first issue of *Brasília* was published in January 1957, more than three years before the inauguration of the city. The magazine had a strong architectural focus and included, in addition to drawings and pictures of architectural forms, interventions from most relevant professionals in the sector as well as articles by politicians about ideas and projects related to the construction of the city. It was an extremely helpful source to understand the elite's discourse on Brasília by exploring its socio-political elements as well as its technical expressions. I found this source in the British Library and have accessed the first 10 years of its publication (1957-1967). By the same token, I accessed the architectural magazine *Módulo*, which published many contributions both in Portuguese and English (therefore aiming to talk to an international audience). *Módulo* was founded by Oscar Niemeyer in 1955; I have accessed the issues of this magazine in IAI in Berlin and have explored its publications from 1955 to 1964).

Thus, by mentioning the technical debates around the transformations, it was possible to think about the international circulation of such specialist knowledge and the ideologies that underpinned it, as well as its vertical asymmetries. All these primary sources allowed me to identify on the one hand the ideas and socio-political aims that generated the project

of Brasília and, on the other, the significant differences of this modernising project in relation to the two other episodes investigated.

In terms of the actual research of documents, apart from the case of newspapers and magazines, which I mainly explored by looking for the date of publications (that is to say, starting from the periods shortly before and shortly after the inauguration of the buildings under investigation), I explored the catalogues by using specific search words. I mostly used words related to the buildings and events related to them, such as, among others, 'Pavillon Argentino', 'Albert Ballu Pavillon', 'Argentina Exposición Universal 1889', 'Exposición Nacional 1898', 'Exposición Nacional 1910', 'Secretaría Educación Pública México', 'Vasconcelos Secretaría Educación Pública', 'Rivera Secretaría Educación Pública', 'Brasília Congresso Nacional', 'Brasília Lucio Costa', 'Brasília Niemeyer', 'Brasília Kubitschek', 'Niemeyer Congresso Nacional', 'Costa Praça Três Poderes'. Depending on the outcome of the research, I perfected the use of the search function by adding or deleting some terms (such as architects' and politicians' first names, dates, city names, etc.). This helped me to find material I was not aware of, as some research catalogues (such as that at IAI) are sometimes able to detect words within the subheadings and actual text of some items in the collection; thus I came across publications that did not work as final primary sources but significantly helped me in directing the research toward specific and until then unknown documents (for instance, this research helped me find Vasconcelos' specific speeches and pieces of work, as well as accessing items of magazines and newspapers in the other two cases).

Moreover, by using both indications from secondary sources and search words, I looked for censuses; these are important documents not only to have historical details about population and its internal composition, but also because they are interesting documents in which the

state described the 'modernisation' of the countries in enthusiastic tones (see, for instance, in relation to Buenos Aires: Censo General de Población [1889a, 1906, 1910] ) and therefore constituted a further angle from which to explore the elite's voice. As a further note on this stage of research, obviously I explored a significant amount material that was not eventually included in the research; however, these sources were nonetheless extremely helpful in allowing me to build a more detailed knowledge of the context, specifically in terms of both accumulating more information and having a better awareness of the tone that marked the narration of these events. Thus, despite the fact that this material is 'silenced' here, it has actually been really important for deepening the contextual understanding of the selected cases of urban transformation.

Finally, I would also like to mention that what I described separately as two stages sometimes consisted actually of two intertwined moments. The fact of having three separated cases made me proceed in an unilinear way: in fact, many times I had to go 'back' to the first stage as well as to jump from the second stage of one case into the second of another (when, for example, I found a kind of source or event – such as international exhibitions – that I immediately believed worth examining comparatively). Obviously, this second operation very often turned out to be unsuccessful, but at the same time I saw it as necessary for a general and somehow unspoken understanding of the context.

### *Working (in) the Archives*

Most of my archival work took place at IAI, the Ibero-American Institute (*Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut*), in Berlin. The second archive in which I carried out significant work – although significantly less than at IAI, was

the British Library. Additionally, I was able to continuously explore archival material electronically, thanks to a variety of institutions that have digitalised at least part of the sources. As should immediately be evident, the *location* of the archives was overwhelmingly situated in Europe (leaving aside the current discussion about whether the UK should be considered part of Europe), with the exceptions being digital archives belonging to public or private institutions located in Latin America (ministries, foundations, libraries, etc.). Thus, except for these latter examples, this geographical distribution of sources is something that inevitably needs to be discussed. There are two kinds of elements that I would like to stress in relation to this. The first is related to my research and the second is political, in the sense that it is concerned with the reasons why the material is located in Europe.

I progressively came to realise that most of the material I needed was relatively easily accessible in Europe, that is, in London, Berlin, and some places in Spain (to which I did not in the end have the need to go). Of course, this does not mean that it was an easy process nor that I accessed all the sources I wanted. For example, despite the British Library offering a significantly rich collection of national newspapers, sometimes there are missing items – which might mean days, weeks, or even months of ‘void’ – and this material cannot easily be found without going to the ‘local’ archives. At the same time, as I will describe in more detail later, it is difficult to know precisely what kind of information the selected documents contain until they are actually seen, and this makes the research process longer – and also more unpredictable – than expected.

The fact that the research was carried out exclusively in Europe – excluding access to local digital archives – is due to a number of reasons and obviously presents some contradictions. First and foremost, this research’s goal is to explore the narratives that accompanied iconic projects

of urban transformation. In other words, as I will explain in the next section, the research is interested in the 'protagonists' of these changes within the three capital cities. This signifies looking for the 'state voice', that is, searching for documents in which this voice is clearly recognisable. As a result, sources such as national newspapers and magazines, journals, and official reports were of interest; these 'mainstream' sources are likely to be found within large European archives such as IAI and the British Library. Of course, this does not mean that, as mentioned above, all the potentially interesting documents have been accessed; however, given the fact that the research's main goal was to reconstruct the public discourse about iconic projects of urban transformation, European archives provided an extremely rich and variegated selection of sources in this direction. This fact opens the space to a reflection upon the reasons why Latin America's important sources are located in Europe, raising questions about the *coloniality* of the archives. Nonetheless, before discussing this point, it is also worth mentioning that I had received no funding to support my research; this was an element that I needed to consider throughout the design and development of my doctorate. This is to say that, if I'd had the necessity to travel the whole organisation of my doctoral years would have been significantly different.

The changes in the research plan had an impact on the actual realisation of the thesis. First and foremost, during the first stage of fieldwork, after having done the work of building the historical landscape of each city under examination – I explain the several stages of this process in detail later in the chapter – I started collecting primary sources related to Buenos Aires. As the research plan was to reconstruct and analyse both the voices of the ruling elites and those of resistance, I spent a significant amount of time searching for this material. After having collected some material I realised that the project was unfeasible as it was not leading me to directly answer my research questions – that were focused on how the



ruling elites produced images of the postcolonial state at multiple levels (from the urban to the international). I also realised that carrying out this 'double' task would have implied, in addition to much more time, access to funding to travel and search in local archives in the three capital cities. In addition to changing the plan of the research, this also implied access to a significant amount of material on Buenos Aires that I could not use for reasons of consistency within the thesis. The change in the plan affected also the postcolonial framework of the research, in the sense that Postcolonial Studies are often interested in episodes of resistance that official history silences, and I was not able to include this point within this work. As I explain in the conclusive part of the thesis, this could be a future work that would engage and enrich the instigation articulated here.

In terms of progress, after having changed the research plan I also realised that the amount of time available imposed a more selective engagement with the collection of sources; it was of considerable importance to detect the documents in a more systematic way, as time constraints did not allow the exploration, as far as it was possible, of documents that were not directly related to the event and actors under analysis. As a result, the research activity changed by doing so and became progressively more precise and time-efficient. The final thesis mirrors this development, in the sense that it isolates and analyses the elite voices and highlights some discrepancies within them without offering the presence of counter voices and alternative discourses.

As regards the archives, IAI is the largest library and archive in Europe for studies on Latin America. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as the bequest of a wealthy Argentinian with a strong relation to Germany, the centre accumulated an impressive quantity of material throughout the decades. Since my first visit, it has been easy to see that the centre is mostly frequented by scholars from Latin America as IAI's

collection is huge and, like many archives, presents often unique material. This means that the centre is very keen on buying documents from Latin American public and private institutions, material that is obviously seen as important. Talking to some people who have participated in finding and proposing the purchase of material to the library, it is common to hear that potentially important documents are normally not looked after in Latin America and, when they are found, it is relatively easy to acquire them as their value is often underestimated, if not ignored entirely. Of course, this is a wide issue and this is not the place to begin a discussion about the preservation of historical sources in Latin American countries. However, there is an asymmetry of power that, in spite of the great quality of IAI's activity, is inevitably at work here.

The significant difference in purchasing power, even in spite of the evaluation of the documents at 'home', makes in any case the European offer highly attractive. This unbalance is a fact that somehow shapes the research itself and, paradoxically, sometimes creates a sort of inversion in researchers' geographies; that is, people studying Latin America *in* Latin America might have the necessity to travel to Europe, or to the US<sup>39</sup>, bearing in mind also the high costs that make this particularly hard – in order access the 'local' sources they need. Subsequently, there is a strong

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<sup>39</sup> Another important institution strongly specialised in the collection of Latin American material is the University of Texas at Austin, especially through the Benson Latin American Collection. Just to highlight a recent example, shortly after the famous Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez passed away in 2014, the Texan university - through its Harry Ransom Center and the support of the Benson Collection - bought Márquez's lifetime personal collection (manuscripts, notes, letters, pictures, etc.) from the family for the sum of 2.2 million dollars (FOXNEWS 2015) (the institute delayed in disclosing the figure). The president of the University of Texas celebrated the purchase by saying through the university website that that place was the "natural home" for Marquez's material (UTNEWS 2014). Obviously this is controversial however it reflects the structural difficulty for Latin American countries (Colombia in this case) to preserve their own cultural heritage, and the power relations that influence the choices. Reproducing on a much larger scale the informal conversations I had at IAI and have described above, and opening to the public the political question, the family responded to accusations of just accepting the highest offer by saying that nobody from the Colombian institutions had approached them (BBC 2014).

feeling that, looking at it from a global perspective, we can think in terms of *postcolonial archives*. This is perhaps more evident as long as one works in an important institution such as the British Library that the impressive size and variety of its collections gives the impression that it is a sort of living symbol of British imperialism<sup>40</sup>. Indeed, as in the cases of many other cultural institutions such as museums, the imperial history that directly or indirectly contributed to the organisation and development of these institutions cannot be disregarded. This involves noticing how also in this case the 'post' of postcolonial is something that, as discussed in chapter 1, indicates more a *relationship* to colonialism – a sort of inconsistency or rupture – rather than simply a temporal passage (Chambers and Curti 1996; Blunt and Wills 2000; Young 2001).

In terms of the actual work in the archive, in all the cases I had to start from electronic catalogues and, when the research was not too specific, proceed through keywords. This technique offers the opportunity to scan a large amount of titles quickly, exploring through name of journal, argument, author, theme, and so forth, and therefore giving the chance to have a general idea of which material actually *is* available in the archive – although it is necessary to order it before having the possibility to see the physical item. At IAI, as the actual archive is about 30 kilometres from the library and it is not accessible to the public, every order takes 24 hours to be collected; in the British Library the process takes normally 48 hours for the collections I need. As is easy to imagine, when looking through the material requested it was disappointing not to find what I expected. This usually happened with journals and newspapers, as the electronic catalogue is not able to offer any internal information about the singular item's contents so that there is no other option but to explore the material by date of

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<sup>40</sup> Many British institutions were the result of the government's compensation for the loss of slaves in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery. Among them, as is shown in the BBC documentary 'Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners' (2015), is the British Library.

publication (however, at times secondary sources did facilitate the research by referencing a specific number/issue of the material of interest).

Another comment on the way I approached the archives: I mentioned digital and material sources but, in addition, I probably wouldn't have been able to locate much of the material I finally used without the generous help of other people frequenting the archive. In addition to helpful conversations regarding my research topics, people helped me in accessing sources that would have been impossible to find through the electronic catalogue. Although the catalogue is normally quite accurate, as I mentioned earlier the description of the items' contents is never complete; only people who have already accessed the sources know their contents accurately. Hence, such communication is a powerful tool to discover material that it would be unlikely to find using the electronic catalogue (considering also the relatively short amount of time available). This was particularly true in the case of IAI, where the expertise and availability of both archivists and researchers comprises one of the most valuable aspects of spending a period of research there.

As I will discuss in the next section, the decision to collect specific voices from history directed my working strategy in the archive. Methodologically, I was interested in capturing the 'urban enigma', that is, how the elites ruling the young nation states dealt with questions related to cities, urbanisation, and modernisation. Hence, the decision to explore documents such as official accounts helped me retrace what is generally thought as 'public history' in the attempt to uncover its deep controversies and contradictions. Such public history normally silenced History 2(s) in favour of narratives underscoring the ambitions of modernising processes. It is precisely in that silence that it is possible to see the mode of producing the postcolonial, in a way in which the 'otherness' (namely non-European knowledge) was usually silenced – or used as an example to show the

backwardness of the American past. Therefore, the urban enigma in the archive was shaped by these official narrations that on the one hand tried to catch up with the Western world, while on the other disowned part of the country's composition by consigning its population to a past that was very often associated with rural backwardness (post-revolutionary Mexico is one of the few exceptions). In this way the archive clearly re-proposed the centre/periphery approach to knowledge that has shaped Western historical narrations (Chakrabarty 2000).

### *Limitations*

The way I designed the research presents a set of limitations. Principally, it is possible to detect two kinds of limitations. The first concerns the choice of three episodes as empirical cases which structure the analysis. The second concerns the way the archival work has been carried out. To begin with, the fact of choosing three episodes of urban transformation in three different cities implies the crucial question of how to bring a detailed and sophisticated reconstruction of each case without losing important nuances and contradictions. Something is inevitably going to be missed. I have changed the research plan in order to achieve the best coherence in answering the main research questions. In terms of archival work, this meant to make specific choices regarding the kind of sources to be collected as well as where to find them. For example, I decided to narrow down the research focus.

At the very beginning my plan was to analyse not only the voice of the state and elites but also the voices of resistance and finally analyse them together – in relation to the projects of urban transformation. However, as I have explained above, I soon realised that this plan was directly answering my main research questions (that is, understanding how the ruling elites

developed discourses about modernity, national identity and temporalities by means of transformations in the urban environment, see pag.20) and therefore I decided to look only for the material that was strictly relevant to my core research questions. Moreover, this objective was unlikely to be successful not only for reasons of time and funding<sup>41</sup>, but also, as a consequence, because the results would probably have been significantly superficial and approximate; the main risk was that of offering data lacking internal structure and coherence. As a result, I decided to concentrate only on 'the protagonists' of the projects of transformation, isolating their voices and analysing them in relation to key themes concerning my research questions. This implied a substantial absence of voices that do not belong to the ruling elites (in Marxist terms, the dominant classes) and therefore a picture that silences the critiques and resistances against these iconic projects. I accepted that was an unavoidable limitation of my research and, as I will discuss in the conclusive section of the dissertation, this gap could be filled by future research activities about an exploration of these voices and acts of resistance.

Moreover, the fact of selecting different kinds of documents depending on the case studied (for example deciding to focus prevalently on national press or on politicians' and planners' voices) creates some inhomogeneity within the sources collected. As discussed above, this is the result of the precise intention to highlight multiple angles within the elites' discourse and, in so doing, to see the ideas behind the modernising projects from a more nuanced perspective. However, the problem with this choice is that the overall collection on sources might seem fragmented or even inconsistent; this was the price to pay for articulating a multitone picture of the elites' perspectives which aims to recreate a wide and detailed account

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<sup>41</sup> For instance, the goal of detecting the voices of resistance needs a focus on local archives, where it is more likely to find material helpful to this task such as publications and writings in relation to small political parties, workers associations, and local press.

of their modernising ideologies. I discussed in this chapter some of the main challenges characterising archival work, as well as attempting to address them. In any case, the specific configuration of this study probably enhances the unavoidably fragmented and unfinished nature of historical research. There are always voids, gaps, omissions, and silences in producing historical account; in some ways, what is left out is as important as what is found.

Inevitably, this multiple view of Latin American postcolonialism elides components and elements that, in a variety of ways, participated in the articulation of the historical period under investigation. The high fragmentation of the material collected represents a limit of this research, especially when the material is read in strictly comparative terms, that is, as an attempt to compare the same kinds of sources. Such a comparative design could constitute another way to develop this work, which could involve also a modification of the period analysed, probably deciding to investigate the same historical period in each case in order to see precise aspects of postcolonial national projects given a more specific and restricted historical period. However, the intention to do genealogical work made me decide on a longer period of time in which it is possible to see not only continuities and discrepancies of national projects but also their contradictory *transformations* depending on the combination of spatial and temporal coordinates.

In order to draw this historical geography, the research inevitably presents elements that are not fully comprehensive, for example in terms of collections of similar sources in the same historical period. Due to these issues, the sources used risk appearing vague and general as a result of the methodology used. On the one hand, these limitations forced me continuously to reflect upon the necessity of keeping such a specific research design, that is to say, I constantly had to evaluate the positive

elements that justified this risk. At the same time, these limitations helped me think about potential developments for future research. For instance, each empirical section could stimulate works about how these discourses about modernisation were challenged, therefore generating a picture that is complementary to that built here.

## *Conclusion*

This chapter has provided a discussion on the main elements that concerned the empirical part of this work. From a methodological viewpoint, the fact of investigating diachronically three capital cities raised many questions about comparative approaches and how to adopt a method that was helpful in order to respond to my research questions. Situating the research within comparative approaches, the chapter argued that a move towards relational comparison is able to address at least part of the above-mentioned points and criticisms. By focusing on the constitutive importance of socio-spatial elements, this method avoids conceiving the city as an object detached from its surrounding space, conceiving instead as fundamental the spatial and temporal specificities that participated in the making of the urban environment. Moreover, the dialectical relations that characterise the relational element are seen in a way, following Marx's vision, that is neither totalising nor teleological, therefore escaping from the trap of alleged all-encompassing narrations.

In relation to the empirical work, the chapter has argued that archives constitute the materialisation of power relations, showing how this fact inevitably poses many limits on the researcher's work and somehow delimitates the possibilities of historical investigation. Moreover, the analysis has focused on questions regarding the location of the sources used



and, more specifically, the contradictions behind the fact of carrying out research on Latin America in Europe, and how this led to a reflection upon the postcolonial elements that inevitably mark the condition of many archives.

As a result of these considerations, it is relevant to reflect upon *where* researchers carry out their investigations, in the sense that the richness or scarcity of sources might be tied to political questions rather than – or additionally – to the presence in the actual place of investigation. Chapters 1 and 2 discussed the significance of the location of theory; thus, without any sort of essentialist geography (in the sense of giving an absolute value to the place where the work is produced), the whole conversation has aimed to analyse problematically the research questions in relation to the spatialisation of knowledge and the persistence of hierarchical elements that are clearly a legacy of the colonial world. In general terms, it might be easy to ignore these elements, especially within a field of research and approaches different from this one, but it is quite hard to escape them. While the first three chapters provided the theoretical and methodological questions and assumptions that shaped the development of this research, the next three chapters will consist in presenting and discussing the findings of the empirical work. Each chapter will be dedicated to the transformation of a city.

## **CHAPTER 4. Buenos Aires, A European Door in The Americas: The 'Argentine Pavilion' and The Making of The Nation (1880-1946)**

### *Introduction*

If Argentina at the turn of the twentieth century can be thought of as a country strongly engaged with the production of its own identity both in regional and global context, Buenos Aires surely represented the core of this postcolonial enterprise. The story of the Argentine Pavilion seems to contain the main feature distinguishing this project. The Pavilion's history and 'geography' are very indicative. The building was projected and assembled in Paris in occasion of the 1889 Universal Exposition; after the event, it was transported to Argentina and occupied for decades a prominent space in the centre of Buenos Aires. In Argentina, the pavilion hosted national exhibitions and fairs, until becoming the permanent location of the National Museum of Fine Arts in 1910. Eventually, works of urban renovation caused its dismantlement in 1933, and it was never been rebuilt again.

By retracing the history of the Argentine Pavilion, the chapter explores the ideas of modernisation that marked Argentina during those decades by focusing particularly on three processes: the geopolitical dimension, urban/rural dynamics, and the relationship between national and indigenous populations. These processes are presented in a different order than in the previous discussion as this chapter looks at the history of the building, generally following events chronologically, with one or more of the processes being embodied within each event. After tracing the main

questions concerning the radical modernisation of Buenos Aires at the end of the nineteenth century, the chapter focuses on the three processes.

It will explore the geopolitical dimension by investigating Argentina's participation in the 1889 Universal Exposition which took place in Paris on the centenary of the French revolution; the discussion will particularly analyse how the architectural shapes of the Pavilion articulated Argentina's image within the international context. The chapter will then analyse the urban/rural relationship within this event by looking at the products exposed in the pavilion. Finally, the chapter will reflect upon the idea of national population expressed by the ruling elites by examining the representations of the indigenous population in the 1898 Buenos Aires National Exhibition and the portrayal of national culture in 1910 Centenary Exhibition. The Pavilion, as a space of representation within important events such as national and international exhibitions, simultaneously represented a sort of workshop and showcase in which Argentina's national identity was organised and displayed. Fairs and exhibitions are for historians "screens where to analyse the materialisation of long-term processes as well as the ideological constructions surrounding economic processes" (Lluch 2009: 261). This is extremely evident when we look at the pavilion's history.

Argentina's ruling elites<sup>42</sup> built specific imaginaries of Argentina depending on the context of the event. Postcolonialism was expressed through the 'modernisation' of the national space (by means of a complex relationship between rural and urban) and the racialisation of its population, as well as through the production of an imaginary past that was systematically placed in Europe. Overall, the pavilion's history highlights two main objectives pursued by the ruling elites: on the one hand, there was the desire to strengthen Argentina's agro-export model in the world market,

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<sup>42</sup> With this respect the "Generation of Eighty" played an important role (see next section).

on the other, there was the solidification of Buenos Aires' absolute hegemony over the whole national space.

In the meantime, Buenos Aires experienced dramatical changes. The city's population began to grow rapidly as a result of a constant flow of European migrants and, at the same time, it was radically transformed in terms of urban planning and at the level of its most iconic architecture. Following Hussmann's renovation of Paris, squares and large avenues broke the regularity of Buenos Aires' colonial planning and the construction of stylish buildings marked the elites' space within the city. At the turn of the century, the strong resemblances with the French capital highlighted Argentina's aspirations in terms of national identity. Thus, while 1889 Paris Exposition was one of the first opportunities to show the transformations carried by the political project started in 1880, the pavilion's 'disappearance' in 1933 can be seen as a sort of anticipation of its conclusion. All this came to an end in 1946, when the first government led by Juan Domingo Perón constituted a political turning point which generated a new project of Argentina's national identity.

### *The Modernisation of the City*

1880 represented a milestone in Argentina's history. The solidification of the national system meant the final leadership of Buenos Aires as a capital city: this strengthen and amplified the centralisation of the Argentine economic and political activities which, especially from now, were overwhelmingly concentrated in the capital city. Of course, this had evident consequences in terms of transformation of the urban environment. The imaginary of a new country should be reflected in its capital city and the *modernisation* of Buenos Aires represented the most evident attempt

carried out by the governments in order to achieve this goal. The term 'modernisation' was clearly tied to the model of the contemporary European cities - Paris in particular - which represented the most advanced configurations of the urban environment. The project of shaping Buenos Aires as a 'mirror' of a European metropolis was not new, it was actually already present in the 1820s and this was also a general tendency of Latin American capital cities from the 1850s, in which Haussmann's Paris "became the archetype of urban modernity and refinement for Latin American elites" (Almandoz 2002: 17). During the second half of the nineteenth century it was therefore the Second-Empire Parisian restructuration that strongly influenced Latin America's urban planning, and Buenos Aires was undoubtedly the "foremost case" (Almandoz 2002: 17).

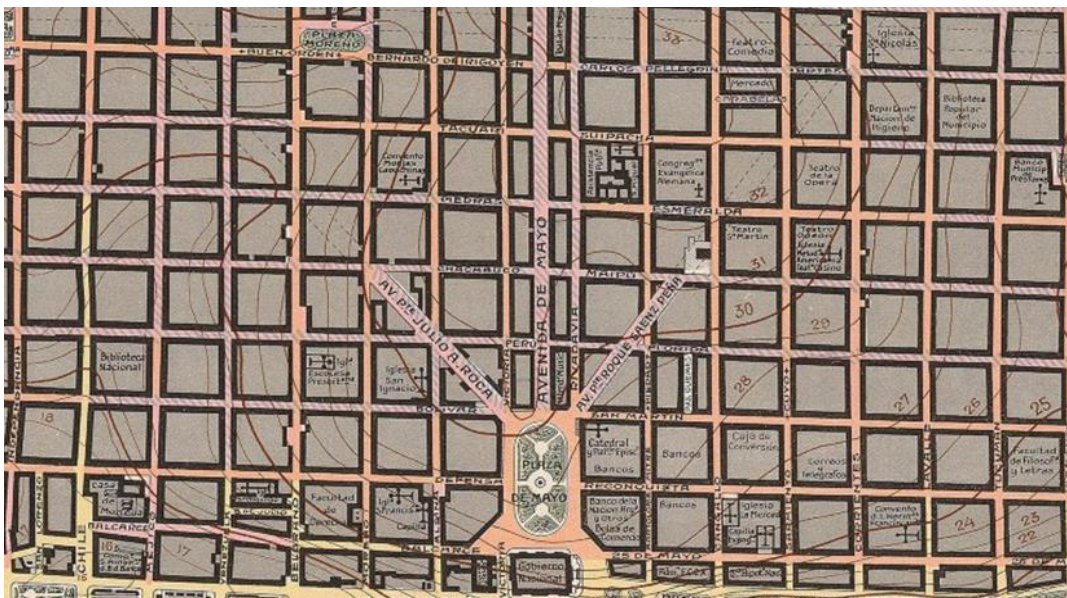
In the 1880s a greater change took place and that decade acted as a springboard in the collective imagination of the postcolonial Buenos Aires. Argentina was led by the famous "Generation of Eighty"<sup>43</sup>, a political elite characterised by liberal institutional forms which were oligarchic in their actual operation, this materialised the coalition between the large estate property and British capital (Altamirano and Sarlo 1983: 72). This elite was strongly convinced that the country should have been shaped building upon the French/European standards and Buenos Aires represented the strategic object which symbolised this attempt to modernise the country. On the whole, the Generation of the Eighty "worked closely with foreign investors and entrepreneurs and sought my means of technology, immigration, and finance to tear themselves away from the stereotype of Latin American backwardness. They adopted the city as they own" (Scobie 1974: 109).

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<sup>43</sup> This political elite is normally considered to be in office until 1916, when the Hipólito Yrigoyen, leader of the Radical Civic Union party, became president.

The first mayor of Buenos Aires, Torcuato de Alvear (in office from 1880 to 1883 as a president of the municipal council, and from 1883 to 1887 as an *Intendente*<sup>44</sup>), firmly promoted the drastic change in the city's urban environment. The famous central square Plaza de Mayo took shape in 1884 and it became soon the *centre of the city* around which the political life took place, both symbolically and technically, standing for a crucial element in Buenos Aires's geography over the decades (Scobie 1974: 111-113). A year later, in 1885, the construction of the large Avenida de Mayo began, and the work was projected by the Italian architect Juan Antonio Buschiazzo, an arterial avenue appropriate to the new Parisian style, which eventually was inaugurated in 1894 - a detailed view of Argentine architecture during these decades is offered by Ortíz [1988]. The old urban shape coming from the colonial period was changed at its core (see fig. 1). This decade of urban renovation was closed by the construction of a new port, Puerto Madero, in

*Figure 1 - Buenos Aires Plan, 1916 (section). Source: The University of Chicago Library*



1897. Interestingly enough, “by 1885 the supporters of the Madero port had won the battle to locate the city's harbor east of the Plaza de Mayo,

<sup>44</sup> ‘Intendente’ is the Argentine and Uruguayan word for ‘mayor’ (‘alcalde’ in most of the other Spanish-speaking countries).

confirming the plaza area as the center of commerce and wealth” (Scobie 1974: 113).

Another fundamental element that contributed to the metamorphosis of the city was the rapid increase of the railway system. While it accounted for 2,516 kilometres in 1880, ten years later it rose until 9,432 kilometres, and it would reach the length of 16,563 in 1900 (Sargent 1974: 20). The railway, strongly centralised around Buenos Aires, strengthened further the domain of the port-city over the rest of Argentina, contributing to the concentration of wealth in the capital as well as, correspondingly, to its very physical and social explosion. These transformations were critical for the city’s history: “the mould within which Buenos Aires would expand from 1870 to 1910 had thus been formed by three critical elements – the port, the railroads, and the federal capital<sup>45</sup>. The 1880s proved to be crucial to each” (Scobie 1974: 113). Without denying the extreme importance of these three components, it is probably the port element which historically exerted the highest influence on the city’s social, economic, and even physical composition, before and after the construction of Puerto Madero. After all, the city had been produced around the significance of the port since its very beginning, as Buenos Aires was a project totally oriented towards outside. This externality was the result of the peculiar combination of city’s history and geography which, as we are going to see, generated an identity that was often in contrast with the rest of the Latin American space; the elites strongly promoted ‘ideas’ that were constantly identifying Argentina with Europe, and specifically France.

### *A French Enclave...*

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<sup>45</sup> As mentioned in chapter 4, Buenos Aires was proclaimed Federal Capital in 1880.

By the end of the 1880s Buenos Aires undoubtedly occupied a predominant role over the national space as the capital's identity was closely tied to that of the nation. It therefore constituted a significant space for the very understanding of Argentina. In addition, this strongly implied the issue of situating the country internationally, which means placing the country within a global set of social, political, economic and cultural relations. Within this context of material and conceptual production of the national space, the Universal Exposition which took place in Paris in 1889 represented a great opportunity, to showcase the new Argentina to the world. This section will explore how Argentina constructed this *geopolitical understanding* during the exhibition. By specifically focusing on the organisation of the Argentine Pavilion and on its architectural discourse, the following section will discuss how Argentina portrayed itself as a country whose identity was closely related to European and French 'tradition' and, accordingly, stressed a clear and paradoxical detachment from the Latin American space.

The Universal Exposition in Paris was an important event in the international scene. Since mid-nineteenth century, international expositions had been a strategic place to present the high degree of 'modernisation' of the European countries (Greenhalgh 1988). More specifically, considering both the dramatic economic growth characterising Western Europe and the epochal transformations and new landscapes brought by Industrial Revolution at the dawn of the century, world expositions represented ambitious national challenges in demonstrating the most advanced inventions, in any possible fields, that highlighted such a relentless rush toward the future<sup>46</sup>. Architecture and urban life were strategic sectors where to show the last progresses in technology, art, and knowledge. The

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<sup>46</sup> "The era of this global victory was initiated and punctuated by giant new rituals of self-congratulation, the Great International Exhibition, each encased in a princely monument to wealth and technical progress" (Hobsbawm (1997) [1975]: 47).



first international exposition, known as the Great Exhibition, took place in London in 1851. The most famous piece of work was undoubtedly represented by the Crystal Palace, the temporary structure which hosted the event, a worldwide showcase in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. If the Crystal Palace was the symbol of the 1851's exposition, the Eiffel Tower was that one of the Paris exposition, projected for being officially opened on the first day of the event.

Architecture, in its urban and monumental form, was one of the most iconic 'objects' which were able to express the prestige of the science and technology of each country. On the whole, expositions can be seen as sort of global containers showing the most recent human technologies that were produced at that time<sup>47</sup>. Of course, it was the European *time* that worked as a yardstick for the rest of the world, and expositions seem thus to be "as expressions of the same process of categorization and distribution of knowledge in a context of nineteenth-century imperialism" (Fernández-Bravo 2001: 116). The Argentine Pavilion was conceived within this cultural and political mentality, as a manifestation of Argentina's attempt to place itself in the international scene.

After winning a contest organised by the government (Juárez Celman, 1886-1890), a team of artists and sculptors led by Albert Ballu, a French architect who graduated at École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, was appointed to design the pavilion that would have hosted Argentina in the prestigious exhibition taking place in the French capital (Schavelzon 1984). The pavilion was inaugurated on 25 May 1889 and was the first one that receiving the official visit of the French president Sadi Carnot and its government (Alcorta 1890a: 9); since the beginning, the Argentine section was of the one of the most important points of interest of the exhibition

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<sup>47</sup> As stressed by Timothy Mitchell, exhibitions were something more than attempts to represent the world into their installations, it was actually a matter of conceiving *the world as exhibition* (Mitchell 1989).

(Djenderedjian 2009: 200). The structure had an interesting story in terms of both architectural design and geographical identity. The pavilion was fully made of iron and glass, in accordance with European architectural tendencies during those years (Buschiazzo 1964), the symbolic apogee of which was achieved by the Eiffel Tower<sup>48</sup>. By doing so, Argentina represented itself “in contrast” to what it was thought to be the Latin American identity (Fernández Bravo 2001: 118).

The pavilion was ambitiously intended to show the up-to-date state of Argentine architecture and technology; more broadly, it symbolised Argentina’s move towards modernisation. It is worth remarking the importance of the Universal Exposition as an international showcase for new and old countries; for example, “Latin America occupied an ambiguous position in the imperial world at the fin de siècle: the countries were not considered proper nations per se, yet they weren’t colonies either” (Fernández Bravo 2001: 117). In relation to the Paris Exposition, the pavilions representing Latin American countries shown simultaneously *what they were and what they aspired to be* (Schavelzon 1984).

The organisation of the Universal Exposition wished to design a sole pavilion for all the Latin American countries; this idea was rejected by Argentina, which pretended to have an entire pavilion for its own products (Alcorta 1890a: 4). This fact expressed Argentina’s determination to be seen as something somehow separated to Latin America. This move within an important event such as the Exposition in Paris clearly revealed the elite’s project of building a national identity which was to some extent unrelated to the Latin American world, to its culture and imagination, therefore

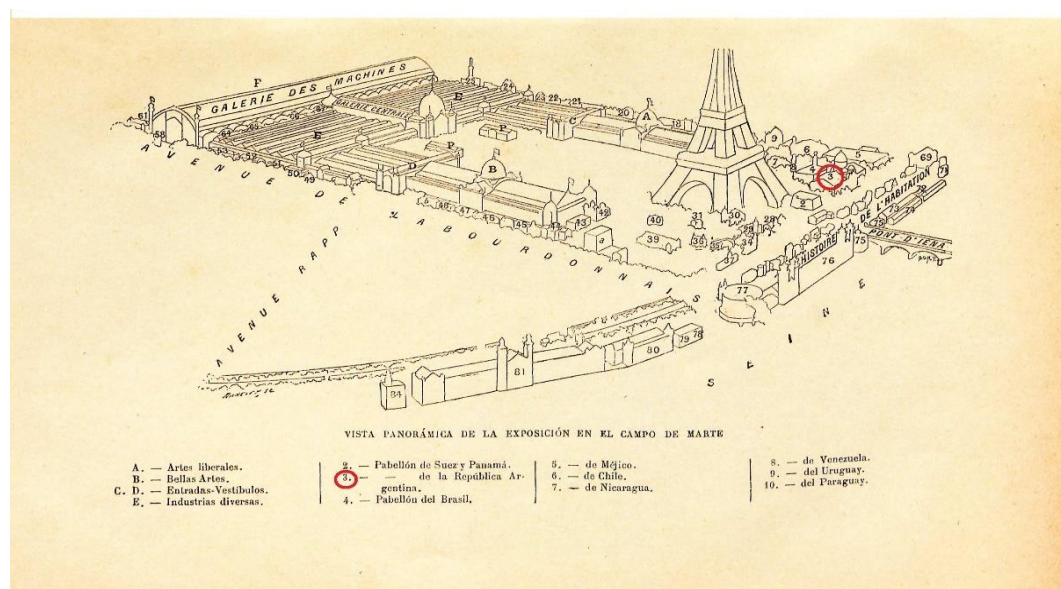
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<sup>48</sup> That period of iron and glass is usually thought to initiate with the inauguration of Crystal Palace at London Great Exposition. An important study of Crystal Palace’s ‘modernity’ and impact on contemporary public is carried out by Marshall Berman (Berman 1983: 235-248).

undermining the idea of Latin America of a sort of uniform “region” (Fernández Bravo 2001: 119).

Thus, on the one hand, the Exposition represented an opportunity for Latin America to *renegotiate* its position on the global map (Fernández Bravo 2001), attempting to escape the marginal role it was trapped into since the time of the European conquest (Mignolo 1995: 259-313). Yet, within this situation, Argentina exerted pressure towards the opposite direction, that is, placing its national identity outside the Latin American context and imagining itself at the core of Europe. The Pavilion had this precise goal. The structure’s location was of primary importance; Antonino Cambaceres<sup>49</sup>, president of Argentine Senate and First Delegate of the commission responsible for the organisation, managed to have the pavilion located in a position of remarkable centrality within the Exposition’s map,

*Figure 2 - Map of Paris World Exhibition. Source: Alcorta 1890a*



namely “on the bank of the Seine and close by the Eiffel Tower” (Alcorta 1890a: 4; Exposition Universelle de 1889 [1889]) (see fig.2).

<sup>49</sup> Cambaceres died on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1888 and could not see the Exposition (Alcorta 1890a: 10). Santiago Alcorta took over after him and, at the end of the event, edited the official volumes reporting the activities (Alcorta 1890a, 1890b).

The commission initially requested as much as 6000 square meters to be occupied by the pavilion, then 4000 after the rejection of the request, eventually it had to accept “only” 1600, as it was told within the Argentine official report (Alcorta 1890a: 4), this stressed the extreme ambition which underpinned the whole project. Ballu pointed out how the Exposition’s architecture expressed coherently a new era; for example, it was the first time in which metal was “the main material in constructions” (Ballu 1890: 335). Highlighting the importance of iron and smelting as protagonists of the change, and particularly visible in the most iconic creations within the fair, Ballu remarked the fact that, after all, the use iron was not an absolute

*Figure 3 - The Argentine Pavilion. Source: Alcorta 1890a*



novelty in 1889, “already in Europe, and especially in America” there had already been ambitious attempts at building “daring bridges above abysses and rivers” as well as “frameworks destined to cover large spaces” (Ballu 1890: 336) (fig. 3).

Thus, while he was describing the combination of iron materials such as ceramic and tile, the architect underlined the *monumentality* and renewed aesthetic characterising these projects. The Argentine pavilion was built in accordance with this ‘modern’ mentality (some rare building’s pictures and maps in CeDIAP). The structure was designed for being moved to Buenos

Aires (Ballu 1890: 377); in the meantime, it was enthusiastically described to the Argentine public that was unable to participate in the Parisian event:

“those Argentinians whose businesses hold back in the country during [the period of] the Exposition, do not despair in front of the idea of not being able to admire the Palace of your nation. You will not be deprived of this pleasure, since, at the end of the exposition, the palace will be entirely transported to Buenos Aires and precisely rebuilt” (El Sudamericano, 20/7/1888: 415).

The newspaper talked to a considerably narrow restrict elite, as it explicitly referred to people unable to travel to Paris for business reasons. Furthermore, in a singular way, the ‘Palace of your nation’ was conceived in Paris and, as we are going to see shortly, it lacked any clear reference to what it was supposed to be, its motherland. Again, the strong attention towards the architectural form built in the heart of Europe - and particularly in Paris! - highlights the ambitious place that Argentina aimed to occupy on the geopolitical scene. Eventually the prestigious palace was going *home* - for the first time - which at a symbolic level, further emphasised that Argentina was actually ‘born’ in Europe.

José Martí, the Cuban poet and anticolonial leader, wrote words full of pleasure towards the Argentine Pavilion in Paris, saying that “a bright sun shines over the trees and pavilions, and it is the Argentine sun”. He added that that “palace of golden iron and coloured crystals” represented an invitation from “the new American man” to “the world full of astonishment to admire what a recent born Spanish speaking people is able to do in a few years only, thanks to its passion for work and freedom” (Martí 1966 [1889]: 107-108). Martí saw the beauty of the pavilion as a sort of revenge against the alleged backwardness of Latin America in comparison to Europe.

As Ballu pointed out, the pavilion's structure was "extremely simple" (Ballu 1890: 377). The pavilion had a 60-meter façade, was 34 meters tall and 25 wide, it was accurately decorated by columns, bronzes, mosaics, and shields in its exterior, as well as by statues, paintings, and a large variety of electric lamps in the interior (El Sudamericano, 20/7/1888: 415; Ballu 1890: 376-377). If the project of the Argentine government was to detach Argentina from Latin America through the construction of the pavilion, the intellectual environment surrounding the project seemed to be strongly in line with this purpose. If the goal was that of reproducing a clear and up-to-date European and particularly French style, nothing was better than a French staff in the design, construction, and decoration of the pavilion. Ballu coordinated a team of French artists responsible for the design of the project.

As the Argentine official report proudly stressed with its concluding points about the event, the Argentine section "started soon to attract the interest of the public for its pavilion which, according to what English workers' delegates reported, was the newest, most luxurious and *suggestive* of the entire Exposition, and they collocate the pavilion among the splendours of the event" (Alcorta 1890a: 71, emphasis in original). Each part of the work, such as bricklaying, carpentry, glassware, was assigned to a French company, which is not surprising as the pavilion was conceived in Paris; however, even the more artistic and thus representative pieces were commissioned to "renowned artists" that "had to figure within this Exposition" (Alcorta 1890a: 6). For example, there were recruited painters "whose paintings cost thousands of francs" such as "Jules Lefebvre, Tony Robert Fleury, Hector Leroux, Luc-Oliver Merson, Besnard, Gervex, Saintpierre, Barrias, Cormon and Ch. Toché" (Alcorta 1890a: 6). Not only the commission totally disregarded Argentine art and artists, but it also identified Argentina's aesthetic with the conservative part of the French



scene (for instance, Jules Lefebvre would become member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1891) which at that time offered already well-

*Figure 4 - The Argentine Pavilion, interior. Source: El Sudamericano, 20/7/1889: 153*



known alternative interpretations such as, just to give a famous example, that of the impressionists (fig.4, 5). After all, Ballu himself was the son of Théodore Ballu, a notable architect who designed important buildings in Paris. All these elements are able to grasp the Argentine government's commitment with *tradition*, specifically French in this case, and more broadly, it mirrors a clear attempt to show the European roots, as well as a European understanding, in shaping the national identity. In this case, this is perhaps even more evident given the fact that the pavilion in France was built as a kind of miniature in order to thoroughly summarise the peculiarities of the Argentine nation. An overview of architectural models in Argentina's exhibitions until the 1930's is provided by Brandariz [2015]). Moreover, the official report made an important observation in relation to the relationship between Argentina and Buenos Aires. It is said that "until now, the [Argentine] Republic was very little known, people thought that the *nation* was Buenos Aires" whereas, thanks to the Exhibition, "both those who could personally visit the pavilion and those who read about it in the newspapers have now a great idea of the country and of its richness" (Alcorta 1890a: 72, emphasis added). It is within the articulation of these multiple geographies that 'modern' Argentina was built.

Thus, if tradition could be often considered as the "constitutive outside" of *the modern*, as Ananya Roy convincingly stressed (Roy 2001: 8), in this case tradition was used - on the contrary - as a *way-in* to modernity. It was a geopolitical movement which adopted both French/European (narratives of) past and present in order to articulate Argentina's access to the modern. As explored in Marshall Berman's fascinating analysis of Crystal Palace's discourse of modernisation (see note 48 above) (Berman 1983), the Argentine pavilion in Paris followed such rigid norms that were certifying the advent of the modern era. In this case, Argentine elites articulated an approach that was on the one side historical (the access to modernity) and on the other geographical (the claim of European roots) that



*Figure 5 - The Argentine Pavilion, statues. Source: El Sudamericano, 20/7/1889: 129*



aimed to consolidate the image of a prominent geopolitical position. This was clearly highlighted by prominent architects working in Argentina at the turn of the twentieth century. For example, an important figure such as

Alejandro Christophersen stated that French art had to be carefully imitated as it represented the “sceptre of elegance” at an international level (Christophersen 1920: 159). This was part of wider reflections that, in addition to the national question, was marked by similar concerns about the destiny of *American architecture* (Berro 1921). For example, the architectural journal *Arquitectura* offered different perspectives, for instance whilst Professor Román Berro criticised the lack of an actual American style throughout the Americas he however criticised the fact that “everywhere in the New World we note irresistible tendency to blindly follow the transatlantic trends”, proposing that “Europeanisation is the password and on its name architecture’s positive qualities are scarified with no hesitations” (Berro 1921: 145). It was a temporal matter, working through how the future should be imagined.

In the world peripheries emerged from the colonial period, the modern era passed through acrobatic articulations of past and present. In the case of the Pavilion, its shapes indicated the essence of Argentina’s geopolitical project, in the sense of architectural structures that speak through the “very material, physical-spatial and visually symbolic element[s] of the building, and building *form[s]*”, in a context in which the construction acts as “a sign” (King 2004: 4, emphasis in original). Building on King’s theoretical reasoning (King 2004: 4-5), the materiality of the Pavilion was therefore the language through which the elites situated the *imagined community* (Anderson 2006 [1983]) of Argentina - that is, its geopolitical location - on the global map.

Finally, it is very important to remark that Pavilion’s narrative was not defined in isolation by the Exposition; on the contrary, the French/European discourse in architecture and urban planning strongly influenced Buenos Aires’ transformations occurring from the 1880s onwards. However, Argentina’s geopolitical discourse in the Universal



Exposition showed a twofold character. On the one hand, it aimed to differentiate Argentina from the rest of the Latin American context, attempting to insert the country within a prestigious position internationally. On the other hand, looking at the products exposed in the pavilion, there was a different representation that designed Argentina as a rural space. The up-to-date technology that marked the design of the pavilion strongly contrasted to the idea of a country dominated by agricultural life.

### *...in a Rural Country*

In addition to Argentina's broader geopolitical ambitions, the Argentine Pavilion in Paris International Exposition also emphasised the shaping of a specific concept of the national space that was somehow in contradiction with the ideas of modernisation highlighted in the previous section. By analysing the products exhibited in the Pavilion, this section will explore the elites production of a discourse that depicted Argentina as a rural space. In relation to the three themes explored in this research, this depiction speaks on the one hand to the *geopolitical element* - as an expression of the intention to reinforce Argentina's role in the world market - and also to *the urban/rural relationship*, given its contrast with the positivist discourses around cities that characterised Argentina during those decades.

Starting with this latter point, urbanisation was conceived as an important element in the modernisation of Argentina: Buenos Aires - the cultural, political, economic centre of the country - embodied the object at stake in this challenge. Additionally, by looking at the significance of international exhibitions at that time, urbanisation is definitely one of the crucial elements that "dictated" the spirit and contents of the events

(Greenhalgh 1988: 142). Yet, in the Paris Exposition, Argentina presented itself as a successful producer of agricultural goods, in order to insert the national economy, strongly characterised by the elites' ownership of great estate in the countryside, within the world market. Even following the official report's enthusiastic description, there is no doubt that "the general character of the Argentine section was that of an exhibition of raw materials, as the representation of our industry had little importance" (Alcorta 1890a: 12). Here again, from the government's voice, the quantity and quality of the products in the pavilion demonstrated Argentina's wealth and opulence<sup>50</sup>, but with particular regard to the primary sector: "the collections of wool, cereals and wood, have been presented in their full variety, showing their enormous abundance within the Republic" (Alcorta 1890a: 12). Especially cereals, which "occupied a considerable space" and their quality had "a great effect on the visitors", who could also appreciate tables indicating "the figures of our astonishing production and its increase year after year" (Alcorta 1890a: 12). Moreover, the report stressed the presence of refrigerators which provoked the "curiosity" of the public, stressing how they could facilitate the conservation of meat during its journey to Europe (Alcorta 1890a: 13-14), therefore being able to significantly improve the conditions for the expansion of Argentina's primary sector in the international market.

Thus, if urbanization and technology were the protagonists of World Expositions, as well as Buenos Aires' transformations were representing the Argentina's race towards modernisation, the pavilion in France offered a contradictory element of this picture. On the one side, the structure was designed and built following meticulously the French/European standards of technology, art, and aesthetics, namely, a general sense of European past and present alike. Yet, this idea of prestige was not in harmony with the

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<sup>50</sup> An accurate description of the products exhibited in the various pavilions is in Phalp 1889.

solid image of an agrarian country which was offered through the products showed in the pavilion. In a time when the world was experiencing the apogee of imperialism, in which technology played a central role, the shaping a country as 'rural' meant placing itself explicitly somewhere in the world periphery and outside Europe. Interestingly, the close link between industrialisation and modernisation was significantly clear in many of Argentine narratives. For example, the report justified the lack of national industry at the Exposition by saying that manufacture *did not want* to take part in the event; the same report stressed the presence of a "great number" of manufacture that "we *already* have" (Alcorta 1890a: 14, emphasis added). For instance, after having noted the success of the Argentine exhibition, it is said that "our pavilion lacked an installation of views, plans, regulation and statistics of Buenos Aires' Stock Exchange, as well as of Schools of Medicine, Universities, and the several Scientific Societies, the Departments of National and Provincial Engineers" (Alcorta 1890a: 14), implying that all these prestigious societies underlined Argentina's modernisation.

There was therefore the acute *desire* to show that Argentina was *already* able to independently produce a significant variety of goods, thus, it would have been possible to give "the people an idea of our stage of civilisation that they do not attribute to us" (Alcorta 1890a: 14). There is a clear contradiction underlying the preparation of the event and these few lines quoted are able to uncover many of its aspects. Firstly, the accurate organisation of the pavilion did not correspond to the showing of industrial products, as it used to happen in the international exposition in order to demonstrate technological and national prestige. Such a lack was to some extent compensated by saying that the manufacturers themselves refused to participate and therefore Argentina could not reveal the alleged excellent state of its industry. However, the report remarks that "it was curious to observe the impression that such a view [of the luxurious products exhibited] produced in the spirit of the visitors, they exclaimed *there are the*

*same things we have here! There are tramways, there are plazas, there are gardens like we have here!"* (Alcorta 1890a: 15, emphasis in original). This particular emphasis on the surprise of the visitors highlights the strong perception of distance from the European world. The discourse was clearly contradictory and it appears to be a way of reconciling the absence of national industries or, an awareness of their irrelevant role within the global market.

Secondly, the artworks exposed in the pavilion further reinforced the overall idea of an agrarian country. One among these was the allegoric bronze sculptures placed in the frontal gate, designed by the French Jean-Baptiste Hugues, represented The Argentine Republic which "was symbolised by a woman leant on a cow" and was surrounded by little figures representing agriculture, animal husbandry, and industry (Vitali 1987: 32). In addition to two mosaics representing again agriculture and animal husbandry, a third one, how it is described by the newspaper La Prensa (Buenos Aires) on 27/06/1889, "represented a gaucho seated on the ground having a white horse, a group of sheep, and a dog beside him" and was probably made by the French Louis-Ernest Barrias (quote and discussion in Vitali 1987: 32). Here again the strong bound with rural life, around which the identity of Argentina was shaped for the exposition, emerged.

Thirdly, there is a clear understanding of the linear progression in relation to modernisation, industry was seen as a *temporal signal* indicating the stage of progress. Just to give another example, the achievement of *maturity* by the country was narrated in a triumphal way in the national newspapers: "the Argentine pavilion's showings are of the best quality and make clear once again Argentine Republic's extraordinary richness" (El Sudamericano 20/7/1889: 99). Using a similar tone, the official report remarked that the task of showcasing Argentina's modernisation has been successful, as "our exhibition could not have been more complete or more

important than it was, and it represented at best our stage of civilization and progress" (Alcorta 1890a: 15). By highlighting that Argentina had already achieved a certain phase of modernisation showed the perception of being saw as locked into an early 'stage of civilisation'. This sharply corresponded to Chakrabarty's concept of "waiting room" (Chakrabarty 2000: 65), or state of "not yet" (Chakrabarty: 8-9), illustrating the different temporality in which former colonial countries felt trapped into, and how they tried to demonstrate the reduction or elimination of such gap.

Finally, the pavilion's history in Paris seems to perfectly embody the enigmas underlying the 'modernisation' of a postcolonial country. The problematic relationship between urban and rural is at stake; in this case, the strong attempt to urbanise the country clashed against the elites' interests of inserting Argentina in the world market mainly as an exporter of agricultural goods. This choice would shape the country's role in the global economy for many decades, and such destiny would be shared along with many other Latin American countries, ending up for being one of the crucial elements of critique in Dependency theorists' centre-periphery model in the 1960s and 1970s (Furtado 1964; Frank 1970; Quijano 1977; Cardoso and Faletto 1979 [1969]). On the other hand, this contradictory image was produced for an international audience. Internally, as it will be seen in the next section, the elite's national project was elaborated in a dramatically different way. The pavilion, even when it was moved to the other shore of the Atlantic, it kept prestigious role of a showcase in which, during both national and international events, Argentina's identity was strategically shaped.

The pavilion was moved to Buenos Aires at the end of 1890, after an adventurous Atlantic crossing in which, during a tempest, some of its pieces were thrown into the sea in order to facilitate the navigation (Vitali 1987:

34). Once in Argentina, the pavilion remained basically unused<sup>51</sup> until the 1898 National Exposition, when it was reassembled in the central Plaza San Martín, located between Recoleta and Plaza de Mayo. In the meanwhile, the transformations boosted in the 1880s had rapidly produced their results in the city's forms and conceptions, and the imminent arrival of the new century was embraced by a further push towards modernisation.

The mayor Adolfo J. Bullrich, in office from 1898 to 1902, represented a topical figure for the metamorphosis of the Argentine capital. As it is stressed in a collection of original documents from the mayor's archive (*Archivo del Intendente Municipal Adolfo J. Bullrich* [collected in Troncoso 2004]),

“the change of the urban landscape that began with the intendente Torcuato de Alvear [the first mayor of Buenos Aires] [...] was imperative and culminated, at the dawn of the twentieth century, with the intendente Adolfo J. Bullrich [...]. Both actions were unavoidable for the modernisation of Buenos Aires: they broke the colonial draughtboard of Buenos Aires's narrow streets and, by wide avenues, accelerated the traffic; they provide the city with big and singular public buildings; they improved the sanitary aspects, installed running water, sewers, drainages, museums, parks and squares” (Troncoso 2004: 337).

Besides, quoting the words of the Argentine historian David Viñas, the strong visual impact characterising the mayors' work suggested to remember them by the persuasive expression “the scenographer mayors” (quoted in Troncoso 2004: 337).

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<sup>51</sup> The pavilion was fully reconstructed in 1893 and inaugurated on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1894 Brandariz, G.A. (2005).



The project of modernisation of Buenos Aires should be understood within the cultural and ideological environment that characterised Argentina at the end of the century. The strong faith in progress resulting from the extraordinary technical advancements experienced in the wake of the industrial revolution marked the consolidation of the European hegemony worldwide. This trust in science and technology was the protagonist of new and popular event such as national and international expositions, usually organised by imperial countries, namely England, France and, as a growing power, the United States. Their influence acted certainly on the political terrain but, as a result, it was particularly strong in the cultural one. Many countries tried to reproduce that model that was thought to be successful. Regarding Latin America, “at the end of the nineteenth century Argentina was the’ South American country whose intellectual atmosphere reproduced more faithfully the changes in the sensitivities and tendencies which gained ground within the developed countries” (De Lucía 2000: 147).

Within this cultural atmosphere, in Argentina groups and associations engaged with the investigation and concrete realisation of these ideas, often characterised by strong positivist traits (De Lucía 1997). Following this rationalist approach, the Argentine Scientific Society (*Sociedad Científica Argentina*), founded in 1872, organised the first Latin American Scientific Congress in Buenos Aires in 1898, aiming to spread and coordinate the scientific ideas across Latin America. This approach had many repercussions on the very idea of the city; hygiene became a critical matter within the discussion and transformation of the urban environment, for instance, wide sections of Buenos Aires’ censuses were dedicated to this topic (Censo General de Población 1889a, 1906, 1910). Part of these concerns were due to an epidemic of yellow fever occurred in the Southern neighbourhood of San Telmo in 1872: the illness killed 1,614 people and caused the displacement of the wealthy sectors of the urban population

towards the north side of the city; since then, this part of the urban population identified itself with that section of the city.

The scientific mentality as well as the fear of new epidemics created, across these decades, “the emergence and consolidation of an increasingly medicalised society marked by fear of contagion, state intervention in private life, and by various attempts to reform, care for, and control people’s morality, sociability, sexuality, and daily habits” (Armus 2011: 2). Overall, this scientific ideology permeated many sectors of Argentine society, especially those related to the urban environment; this was thought to be a topic feature indicating modern life. One of the events in which this mentality was showed and diffused further was certainly the 1898 Buenos Aires National Exhibition.

### ***Outside the Nation’s Time: The Indigenous Populations***

The rural image of Argentina was a product that the elites forged exclusively on an *international level*. When it came to representing the country within Argentina itself, the national identity was articulated quite differently with a central preoccupation being the conceptualisation of the *national population*. The discourse about this element was particularly strong during 1898 National Exhibition. Due to this being a national event, with the audience having a national than international composition, the aims of its narrative were significantly changed. It was an internal affair, and the interests at stake were therefore different. The ruling elites had to consolidate their power over the national space and, in order to do so, Buenos Aires had to justify and reinforce its leading role within the representation of a seemingly inevitable process of modernisation. The sharp detachment from non-European history remained a strong narrative

element but, in exerting Buenos Aires' overwhelming power over the rest of Argentine territory, the elites counted on a strong industrial and technological image of the capital city, image that rhetorically compared the modern/urban models of life to the backward/rural of the indigenous population.

In this sense, 1898 National Exhibition represented an occasion to carry out this discourse; in line with the importance and prestige given to exhibitions at that time, it was conceived of as an event of "great proportions" (La Prensa 16/10/1898). The chosen location was the central Plaza San Martín and the scenery consisted of several installations hosting the various sections of the event; among them, after being untouched for several years, there was the prestigious Argentine pavilion<sup>52</sup> coming from the Paris Exposition. The event began on 16 October 1898 and was inaugurated by the President of the Republic surrounded by ministers, civil and military delegates, as well as three thousand soldiers. The *nation* was again the protagonist of the exhibition: La Prensa stressed that "at the centre of the pavilion there is a statue symbolising General San Martín [a key figure for Argentina's independence]" and that "the basis of the statues is covered by Argentine flags" (La Prensa 16/10/1898). The nation was therefore, and not only symbolically, the centre of the event. However, this time the audience was mostly internal and the narratives were thus substantially different from those presented in Paris.

The main goal of the exhibition was to represent Argentina's modernisation by highlighting the "scientistic mentality" of Buenos Aires's inhabitants (De Lucía 2000: 153). In order to stress the role of science and

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<sup>52</sup> It is interesting to note how the pavilion was already well known to public: while describing the exhibition's pavilions and installation the newspaper La Prensa named the pavilion used in Paris just as "the Argentine pavilion", this stresses the importance and unicity that were already characterising the structure at that moment (La Prensa 16/10/1898).

technology in the event, President Julio Argentino Roca set in motion the machines and mechanical installations while visiting the exhibition (La Prensa 16/10/1898). Curiously enough, the exhibition also showed instruments used for illegal activities, such as a machine producing false banknotes, therefore giving an image of modernity marked by its the inevitable mechanical character and, at the same time, suggesting the formidable relationship between technology and power. In other words, there was the impression that industry and mechanisation invaded all the sectors of social activity (La Prensa 03/10/1898). Electricity was another significant feature of the event (De Lucía 2000: 153) as electric light was installed in the exhibition. La Prensa remarked that it made the works “much easier” and provided the opportunity to work at night time, and therefore without “interrupting at all the enthusiasm for the realisation of the event” (La Prensa 16/10/1898)<sup>53</sup>.

During the inaugural speech, the President insisted on the importance of industry for the future of the country; more specifically, he appreciated “the industrial development experienced by the country over the last sixteen years, [the period he was in office], and that period has been considerable and revealing about the progressive tendencies of the country” (La Prensa 17/10/1898). Finally, the president suggested that, in order to foster further national industrialisation, there was a need for a significant increase in schools of arts and crafts. The newspaper welcomed enthusiastically the President’s words and reflected, using a pronounced rhetorical tone, upon “iron monsters that strive to relieve men of physical fatigue, and that through their volcanic eruptions fire up the progress’ resources” (La Prensa 17/10/1898). In Roca’s words, as well as in La

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<sup>53</sup> Electricity started to be produced and used in Buenos Aires only one year earlier, in 1888. The first city in Latin America to be illuminated by electric light was La Plata (Argentina) in 1884. La Plata was a new city built in 1882 and designed following a rationalist conception of urban planning; through the idea of producing a *modern city*, it represented another important example within Argentina’s project of modernisation at that time.

Prensa's patriotic and positivist tone, the solid connection between nation, industrialisation, and progress in understanding the modernisation of the country was evidently strong. According to the popular magazine *Cara y Caretas*, the exhibition stressed the modernity of national industry which "even the least patriot should contemplate proudly" (*Cara y Caretas* 22/10/1898). Additionally, depicting the coming days with uncontested optimism, there was no doubt that "shortly, the country will manufacture absolutely everything" (*Cara y Caretas* 22/10/1898). The path undertaken seemed to be clear.

However, in addition to the primary role of technology, a large number of objects and products coming from all over the nation filled the spaces reserved for the exhibition. After all, as the newspaper remarked, "the visitor can immediately appreciate the development and importance of these two great sources of the country's richness: agriculture and animal husbandry" (*La Prensa* 01/11/1898). More specifically, the newspaper reported how technology was changing the primary sector, making a watershed in Argentine history: "among the many machines and devices exhibited" one could appreciate "electric wire fence", the machine for "marking, shearing and vaccinating" animals and even another one that was able to "count sheep" (*La Prensa* 01/11/1898). It was a formidable partnership between technology and the countryside. Moreover, they exhibited the actual products which related to these sectors such as frozen meats, sugars, plants, wine, and liquor, as well as such artefacts as ceramics, carpentry, fabrics, and collection of wools.

All this abundance stood for the richness and diversity of Argentina's overall production. On the ground floor, the pavilion hosted the luxurious section of the exhibition that consisted of costly furniture and upholsteries. The first floor was dedicated to the feminine, it showed handicraft and, in general, aimed "to awaken more interest in our elegant

world" (La Prensa 16/10/1898). This sector of the exhibition actualised the ideal of a modern country that took shape through the show, adding a 'sophisticated' aesthetic component to the whole picture. Curiously enough, on the first floor of the pavilion, the attempt to show the success of the rapid process of modernisation was spectacularly contrasted with the national 'past'. Along with the variety of industrial, agricultural, and artistic products representing modern life, the National Exhibition showed two families coming from Tierra del Fuego and belonging to the Ona indigenous population, a native people who lived throughout the Patagonian lands.

Showing a native population at exhibitions was quite common during that period. There are mainly two reasons to explain this. Firstly, exhibitions were designed to show the successes of the combination of science, empire, and technology (Greenhalgh 1988); therefore, offering the contrast of people who lived differently, in a time commonly represented as primitive, suggested some evidence of belonging to the right part of history and thus justified colonial enterprises. Secondly, as a part of this intellectual framework, these people gave anthropologists the rare chance to examine their 'objects' of study in person, without undertaking long and difficult trips to 'remote' lands (Fabian 1990; Ballesterio 2011). Buenos Aires' exhibition reflected, in its peculiar way, both these opportunities. One of the most recognised anthropologists working in Argentina, the German Roberto Lehmann-Nitsche, completed a study after having observed the Ona families at the exhibition (Lehmann-Nitsche 1915). Furthermore, the remoteness of the south of the country played a sort of exotic role, serving as an element indicating the vastness of the national space. This anthropological operation contributed to the naturalisation and fortification of the young nation state through Western colonial narratives; however, these were configured on a different scale, that of *internal colonialism* (Casanova 1965; Stone 1979; Coronil 2004; Gutiérrez 2004). In this case, on the national level, indigenous knowledge was wholly racialized and

classified as a clear example of backwardness, implicating the full absence of desire to include the natives in the national project. This signified also the fact that, once again, the nation's past had to be imagined somewhere else, definitely outside the Americas.

The Ona families were brought to Buenos Aires on 2<sup>nd</sup> of November and inserted in to the exhibition the following day (La Prensa 4/11/1898), soon becoming one of the most popular attractions of the event (La Prensa 7, 12, 22/11/1898; Cara y Caretas 12/11/1898) (fig. 6). Only a few days after their arrival, La Prensa noted that "huge interest is awakened in the Buenos Aires' public by these retards of humanity that still live in the Argentine territory; but they are slowly disappearing or transforming, due to the increasing influence of civilising forces" (La Prensa 07/11/1898). Clearly the words of this important national newspaper summarise the articulation of race and national space out of which postcolonial Argentina was produced. It was postcolonial in the sense that reactivated coloniser's key practices in a post-independence period. However, such practices (and the violence they implicitly and explicitly exerted) were strictly colonial, and had been constitutive for the making of modern Argentina.

The two indigenous families were formed of six people: two men, two women, and two children. By being exposed in the 'elegant' feminine section of the exhibition, there were meant to make evident the dramatic contrast with the 'past'; the Indian women were dressed with their habitual clothes, accompanied by their "inseparable dogs" and were even provided with their usual weapons (Cara y Caretas 12/11/1898). However, the popular magazine noted, "it is remarkable their muscular development and corpulence", and "their aspect, far from being repugnant, is likeable [*simpatico*] and attracts the frankness that their intelligent appearance inspires" (Cara y Caretas 12/11/1898). It is a sort of romantic wildness that filters from the magazine's falsely benevolent tone, with attitudes that will

*Figure 6 - Ona families at the National Exhibition. Source: Cara y Caretas, 12/11/1898*



appear again in other comments as will be elaborated on. The press was clearly stressing something distant from the urban world and its supposed industrialisation, seen as a coeval presence of the past. These narratives reflect, and to some extent anticipate, the twentieth century's idea of development as the outcome of a double process of urbanisation and industrialisation (Almandoz 2006). La Prensa described an impressive scene in which the Ona families spent a large part of the afternoon contemplating Buenos Aires from the pavilion's window, enjoying the view of carriages, bicycles, and buildings (La Prensa 07/11/1898). The pavilion in this way became a sort of lens through which to display the urban manifestations of modern life.

The exhibition worked as a museum, namely as a place in which 'natural history' was exhibited through its objects and animals. As it was the case with primatology, indigenous people represented a backward conjuncture of life in the wild nature, in a way in which the combination of nature and culture was designed as simple and rudimental. Indigenous



peoples were placed in a condition between humanity and animality, similarly to the Western traditional representations of animals in the Third World at the dawn of the twentieth century (Haraway 1989). Through their habitual dresses and actions, the Ona families were as an example of naked life, strongly naïve, that would be inevitably swept away by the 'civilising forces'. As a foundational act of nation state, population was classified through traditional colonial practices in line with the modern/backward antagonism which was (re)articulated in the postcolonial state.

In order to stress the genealogy of the Argentine state, it is relevant to remind that 'Argentina' in this context means that portion of territory in the Southern Cone ruled by the creole elites that centralised their power around Buenos Aires. The political result of the conflicts concluded in 1880 determined the solidification of the national territory and Buenos Aires' strong political leadership. After all, the capital was undoubtedly the core from which those 'civilizing forces' were spreading all over the national territory. The indigenous population from the south, which was the last part of the lands colonised during the process of state-building<sup>54</sup>, were brought to exhibition in order to legitimise and naturalise that colonial enterprise.

However, the indigenous people were still seen as inadequate to the urban environment, their curiosity was not enough "to awaken an attachment to this city"; on the contrary, "they want to return to the Tierra del Fuego", and "not because of love towards their fatherland [*patria*], not because they are nostalgic during their exile, but because over there they enjoy more comfort, they are freer and can follow the pleasures of savagery" (La Prensa 07/11/1898). The image of the wildness alongside 'civilisation' was almost paradoxical, but it is extremely interesting how the idea of

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<sup>54</sup> The military campaign that finally defeated indigenous resistance in the southern territories of Patagonia, therefore expanding the frontier in the south, is known as *Conquista del Desierto* (Conquest of Desert). It took place in the 1870s and was led by Julio Argentino Roca (who became President of Argentina from 1880 to 1886 and from 1898 to 1904).

freedom was meant here to go against the modern state, as if, just for a quick moment, all of the dramatic force and violence of the assimilation process that had been constitutive to the arrival of modernity was revealed (Dussel 1995; Lander 2000; Mignolo 2000). However, this ambivalence implied also a hierarchical idea of freedom that implicitly place the native population in an inferior level, considering it as a sort of savage and backward freedom that is extraneous to the rules marking complex societies and that, as a consequence, is not able to fulfil the aspiration of the modern life.

The display of indigenous people indicates the general state of exclusion experienced by natives in the Southern Cone's colonial and postcolonial societies (Quijano 2000). This obviously came with the constant discrimination of these groups which were presented as objectively inferior both in physical and cultural terms. For example, part of the aforementioned observation of the Onas carried out by the anthropologist Lehmann-Nitsche included measurements of the body as indicators of their natural inferiority (Lehmann-Nitsche 1915). Internal colonisation, as well as European, was thus carried out, and justified, for *biological* reasons. Furthermore, their behaviour, music, and food, among other elements, were labelled as evidently primitive; significantly, The Onas' knowledge was described as very simple: it was said that they could count only with fingers, therefore "they do not have any idea about numbers" and "they do not have, therefore, awareness of time" (La Prensa 07/11/1898). In so doing, indigenous knowledge was wholly racialised and classified as a clear example of backwardness, implicating the full absence of desire to include the natives within the national project. Argentine population, thus, should have had precise physical and cultural features that were thought as necessary for the modernisation of the country.

This section analysed how the elites articulated a discourse on the national population that was strongly based on racial categories, strongly

relied on the inferiorisation of the indigenous populations and aimed to exclude them as part of the modernising project. In addition to pseudoscientific motivations, the conceptualisation of their exclusion also adopted cultural elements. As we are going to see in the next section, the formation of a national population was strongly related to the formation of a national culture, as the elites highlighted a sort of void that, which according to them, was defining Argentine culture. Thus, the turn of the century signified a further step in this direction, a discourse that the ruling elites shaped by means of the strong political power gathered in the capital city. In the meantime, Buenos Aires kept being transformed, the beginning of the century signified also the preparation of the first centenary of Argentina's independence, occurring in 1910, a crucial moment in which it was needed to strongly define identity of the country.

### *The New Century: Nation, Progress and Absence of Past*

The beginning of the new century viewed Buenos Aires reinforcing its leadership over national space. The lively environment which characterised the city fin-de-siècle was boosted further by the economic growth experienced the first decade of the twentieth century. Despite the economic crisis experienced in the 1890s, the agro-export model contributed to increase the regional importance of the port: grains and meat were the products dominating the external market (Gutman and Hardoy 1992: 113). Internally, the development of the railway helped the transport of the goods to and from the capital; by looking at its map, still today the drastic centralisation towards the capital city at the expense of the internal connections is evident. Overall, foreign capital represented an important element of Argentine economy, the largest part of the investments was British and "its majority was destined to financing public works in the city

of Buenos Aires, such as the construction services of current water, gas, electric light and tram, the port and railways”, on the whole, “between 1890 and 1916, two third of the total foreign investments were English” (Gutman and Hardoy 1992: 113).

The city’s population continued to increase dramatically due to the continuous flow of European migrants<sup>55</sup>, especially from Spain and Italy; again, the port played a major role as an arrival point of thousands of people, most of whom eventually decided to dwell in the capital city. If, on the one hand, the desire of receiving migrants corresponded to the will of populating the country (will that was well summarised by the words of XIX a central figure of Argentine politics, Juan Bautista Alberdi, who in 1879 famously stated that *to govern is to populate*); yet, on the other hand, most of the people coming from beyond the Ocean ended up living in the capital city, or at least in the most urbanised areas of the country. This contradiction was mostly caused by the elites’ initiative to prevent the access or distribution of land properties, which entailed the solidification of the large-estate structure throughout Argentine territory (Gutman and Hardoy 1992: 121).

As a result of these deep transformations, the city’s forms changed significantly. Gutman and Hardoy noted that Buenos Aires experienced a different kind of variation during that period. While during the last decades of the nineteenth century the increase in population took place within the old map of the city, having thus a strong impact on the population density, on the contrary, at the beginning of the new century, the arrival of new people generated a significant expansion of the city’ perimetry (Gutman and Hardoy 1992: 128). This meant the birth of new neighbourhoods and the transformation of Buenos Aires into a city of international dimension.

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<sup>55</sup> In 1909 national census, Buenos Aires counted 1.231.698 inhabitants, only the 54% of which were seen as ‘Argentine’ (born in Argentina) (Censo General de Población 1910).

In terms of architecture, Europe and particularly France continued to be the main sources of inspiration; Fernando Ortíz noted that during this period European classic symbols were re-elaborated and transformed in what is known in Argentina as *eclecticism*, thanks to the use of feelings related to past built elsewhere (Ortíz 1968). Additionally, as mentioned earlier, at that time Argentina was concluding the first century of its independent history, and the decade culminating in 1910 was rich of publications and reflections upon the present and the future of the 'new' nation, often accompanied with a positivist and triumphalist spirit (see, for example Gutman 1999). The many events and celebrations organised in that period were characterised by a special "patriotic fervour" (Giordano 2009: 1290). It was critical moment for the history of the nation, a moment in which Argentina was meant to take off "its colonial and Hispanic paradigms" attempting to firmly settle itself as an independent nation within the international scene (Méndez and Gutiérrez Viñuales 2006: 216). As well as with many important events at that time, the Argentine government decided to celebrate the important anniversary with an international exhibition in its capital city.

The exhibition constituted a landmark for the making of Argentina's national identity. It was the unique opportunity to show the country to the rest of the world and, obviously, Buenos Aires was its showcase. Hence, "in 1910 during the preparation of the celebrations, the whole city was perceived as a construction site": everything was transforming in the city, and "magazines, books and newspapers wrote, criticized, or received these changes with enthusiasm: the construction of new and tall, private and public buildings, the laying of water or sewage systems in the neighbourhoods causing the digging up of streets, the building of a potable water plant in Palermo [neighbourhood] , the paving of streets and avenues, street

lighting the beginning of construction of the subway, the erection of large railway terminals and steel raised bridges over the Riachuelo [river], the design of numerous urban plans" (Gutman and Reese 1999: 42).

This fervour expressed the strong will to modernise the city, as well as to push Argentina towards the 'great' countries of the world; it was certainly epitomising the idea of Buenos Aires as "the capital of an imaginary empire"<sup>56</sup> (Vázquez Rial 1996). Just to give an example of this enthusiastic sentiment towards science and progress, in an issue of *Cara y Caretas* (09/04/1910) contained an article titled 'The city of the future' (*La ciudad del porvenir*) in which along with the prevision of radical and unrealistic changes in terms of technology and transportation, there were drawings representing fantastic urban visions such as real parts of Buenos Aires to which were added futuristic elements such as sinuous streets passing through buildings' roofs. Clearly, the city was the core around which the national project was conceived and enacted and further radical changes in this direction were proposed in the municipal plan in 1925 (MCBA 1925).

As well as for Argentina, the beginning of the twentieth century signified the first centenary of independence for many Latin American countries<sup>57</sup>, and this represented the opportunity to materialise<sup>58</sup>, through the realisation of big events, the history of each nation; a specific past that, similarly to the Argentine case, had just been *invented* (Lois 2010: 180-181). Regarding the idea of the present, in all these countries celebrating the

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<sup>56</sup> This expression probably echoes the French writer André Malraux, who described Buenos Aires as "the capital of an empire that has never existed" (cited by Gutman and Reese 1999: 45).

<sup>57</sup> Among others: Chile, Colombia, and Mexico in 1910, Peru in 1921, Brazil in 1922.

<sup>58</sup> This materiality was largely expressed through urban transformations: "our [Latin American] capital cities, in most cases, shown a *before* and an *after* the Centenary" (Gutiérrez 2006: 183, emphasis added).

centenary, *modernity* was the absolute protagonist of the commemorations (Gutiérrez 2006: 178).

The celebration of the centenary took place in May 1910 (the 25<sup>th</sup> is the day of the independence) and the exhibition began at the very end of that month, increasing progressively its pavilions during the following months. The event was planned as a fair of international dimension, many countries from the Americas and Western Europe participated and shown their industrial products and historical prestige (Grassi 2011). The whole manifestation was organised to indicate that, once again, Argentina was by then a *mature* country which deserved to belong to the illustrious circle of the Western powers (McMichael Reese and Reese 1999: 322). Although there are similarities with 1889 Paris Exposition, the significance of the place (Buenos Aires) as well as the importance of the anniversary, gave a multifaceted shape to this event. Many international figures participated to the event, including the Spanish Infanta Isobel de Borbon. The fair was thematically divided into five different sections: Agriculture and Livestock, Railroads and Ground Transportation, Industry, Hygiene, and Fine Arts. This division indicates the importance that the Argentine government had for each of these sectors; they were clearly conceived as crucial elements in order to introduce to the world Argentina's economic, technological, and cultural skills.

The 1910 exhibition encapsulated Argentina's goals as these were expressed in the previous international and national fairs (Grassi 2011). This time, there was the desire to keep the country's agro-export model within the world market and, at the same time, though to a lower degree, to show the potentialities of Argentina's industry and technology (for a broad description about Argentine during the centenary, see Altamirano and Sarlo 1983). However, as in the case of 1889 Paris exhibition, arts played an important role; much attention was paid to the Fine Arts section of the

event: this part of the exhibition was hosted in the Argentine pavilion, in Plaza San Martín. Two main elements emerged from this section of the exhibition: first, the permanence of a sort of vacuum in relation to Argentina's national history; second, the intention to fill this temporal void with European elements: not only France, a sense belonging to the Spanish tradition reacquired a significant value for the making of Argentina's identity.

The Fine Arts section was opened from 12 July to 13 November 1910 and attracted great attention among the public and the press (Buschiazzo 1964). Contrary to the previous events, the pavilion hosted not only Argentinian products, but this time the exhibition presented artworks and artists coming from all around the world. According to Miguel Angel Muñoz, the Fine Arts exhibition represented the beginning of a period in which the state intervention in the art sector started to be usual and, more importantly, but it was also perceived as "one of the modern state's inevitable duties" (Muñoz 1999: 256). The Argentine press discussed thoroughly this section and, as much as other segment of national society such as industry and technology, arts was thought comparatively within the international scene, in a way in which the national (and nationalist) component had its absolute prominence over any internal expression or style (Muñoz 1999: 257). Here again, the perception of lack of national history was strong<sup>59</sup>.

La Prensa stressed how "an Argentine school [style] does not exist yet" (La Prensa 28/07/1910). As well as in the case of industry in the 1889 Paris Exposition, the idea of a culture and knowledge that were still somehow *immature* persisted in Argentine's elites, making their chase for

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<sup>59</sup> This reflected also the perception of a poor education system that was not able to make Argentina a modern nation. An important document stressing this aptitude within the Argentine elites is Ricardo Rojas' book *The Nationalist Restauration (La Restauración Nacionalista)* (Rojas 1909).



modernisation once again apparent. Not surprisingly, the hegemonizing objective that characterised the full establishment of the nation state was clearly evident to the Argentine newspaper; it was said that, differently from Swedish, Italian, and Dutch artists (again, only European examples), within the Argentine's artworks "each energy seems isolated or alone" and they "do not have a common or dominant feature" (La Prensa 28/07/1910). Obviously, there was no trace or mention of the indigenous and precolonial culture. There was also a widespread perception of a lack of national art within architectural debates, where often architects stressed the necessity to shape models that were new and adapt to the Argentine nation (for example, from the important architectural journal *El Arquitecto*, this is discussed by Carré [1920] and Géneau [1920]) within a situation that was generally perceived as chaotic and "anarchic" (Acevedo 1919: 59).

Another important daily newspaper in Argentina, *La Nación*, reinforced the concept expressed by La Prensa by saying that "it was not possible that [Argentine] art was born without the concept of secure fatherland" (La Nación 13/10/1910, quoted in Muñoz 1999: 259). The postcolonial project seemed to be absolutely clear within the elites' mind; during a period in which the apogee of nationalism was about to shock the globe with the first world war, they thought to faithfully follow the European national models. As a result, the making of Argentina's *fatherland* entailed the complete erasure of indigenous history, identity and, especially in the case of the south of the country, the very population.

The opposition was between the couples modern/civilised against indigenous/backward population. The Centenary celebrations, as well as in 1898 national exhibition, marked also the urban's supremacy over the rural. *Cara y Caretas* noted that the Railway section was particularly successful, stressing that "this is the most favourite of the public" and that it was visited by "thousands of people every day" (*Cara y Caretas*

30/07/1910). In order to highlight the contrast between the modernising forces and some remotes areas of the countryside, this section of the exhibition included the historical museum in which, among objects and documents belonging to the past, mule drivers were shown coming from the Andean region of Cuyo (Cara y Caretas 30/07/1910), therefore adopting a rhetoric which was similar to that which stigmatised the indigenous population in 1898 National Exhibition. Once again, the contrast between the modernising forces - represented by the railroad - and the rest of the country was displayed through the presence of *distant* elements, both in geographical and temporal terms, within the national space. This concept had echo in the pavilion through the exhibition of a map representing the projection of Argentine railroads over the European territory, showing that the distance between Buenos Aires and Mendoza was the same as that between Paris and Vienna, but stating that Argentine trains made the journey in less time than those of the "old world" (Cara y Caretas 30/07/1910). The relationship between territory, technology and modernisation was this time articulated through this original map shown in the pavilion.

Finally, at the end of the celebrations, the pavilion became the permanent National Museum of Fine Arts. During a period in which the formation of national identity was at stake, visual representations provided by artworks were important tools able to spread the national narrative to a large public (Amigo Cerisola 1999; Muñoz 1999; Costa 2010); 1910's celebrations represented a crucial moment for this goal and the continuity given to the pavilion as fine arts' national residence was certainly an element indicating the clear permanence of the centenary's discourse in the years following the event. Furthermore, the centenary represented a period in which the elites started to promote narratives of reconciliation with Spanish tradition, recuperating some positive values of the colonial time. Clearly, this was in contradiction to the independence celebrations. The

Spanish-American war (1898) had produced many concerns among the Argentine elites, the pacification with the former coloniser by the re-appropriation of its historical heritage became a well-defined aesthetic project for Argentine arts, it represented a geo-political move within a regional context which was clearly beginning to be dominated by the United States (Amigo Cerisola 1999). The participation of the Spanish Infanta in the 1910's celebration is an element indicating the taking of this direction.

The reorganisation of the past was performed through racial elements, namely by claiming the population's biological lineage with the Spanish empire (Altamirano and Sarlo 1983: 74). In the field of arts, this operation was realised through the realisation of paintings representing the glory of historical events such as, for example, the foundation of Buenos Aires<sup>60</sup>, that stressed the heroism of the Spanish race through the celebration of both Juan de Garay, the leader of that colonial enterprise, and the catholic religion (Amigo Cerisola 1999: 175-178).

Within this intellectual environment, the pavilion had been the house of the national fine arts until 1933. When the council decided to renew and enlarge Plaza San Martin, again, on the basis of the European/French standards of modernisation, for the pavilion, the structure which represented probably more than any other that desire of modernity for many decades, this implied the end. It was dismantled in 1933 and it would never be assembled again. Already in 1964, the famous architect Juan Buschiazso, denounced the historical loss; although perhaps between the lines, he spotted the intrinsic contradictions that, in addition to its incontrovertible value, characterised the pavilion. He sadly noted:

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<sup>60</sup> This painting, *La fundación de Buenos Aires*, was realised in occasion of the celebrations of the Centenary; it was commissioned to José Moreno Carbonero, a famous Spanish painter specialised in history painting.

“[the pavilion] should have been preserved as a noble example of rebellion and search, as a symbol of an era of strength and distant and enviable nobility; as a milestone in the history of our taste’s evolution. Its destruction was an unrepairable mistake, as well as it occurred to many architectural monuments in our country, they all disappeared because of a misunderstood sense of what progress is” (1964: 39).

### *Conclusion*

The use of the pavilion highlighted how Argentina’s project of forming national identities was contradictorily articulated across multiple domains. Key elements such as the urban/rural relationship, the idea of national population, and the geopolitical dimension of the country were produced through different discourses depending on the scale of the event in which these representations took place. By the organisation of these multiple narratives within national and international events, the ruling elites aimed to reinforce and naturalise their hegemonic role over the national space. In so doing, the decades which have been investigated here point to the postcolonial ambiguities and contradictions that marked the formation of Argentina’s nation state.

First, in relation to the geopolitical dimension, the architectural style of the Pavilion represented an opportunity to show the elites’ project of situating Argentina’s identity within the French/European world. This signified a prestigious location within the world hierarchy and yet displayed a strong intention to detach Argentina from the Latin American space. However, this idea of progress and importance was somewhat conflicted - and this is related to the second point about the configuration

of the rural/urban relationship to the depiction of an agrarian structure of the country. The 1889 International Exposition in Paris was an opportunity for the elites to consolidate the role of Argentina as a global exporter of primary goods as the elites were the owners of the large estate properties of the immense countryside. As a result, the products exposed in the fair aimed to portray this rural image of Argentina for the international public, therefore staging an ambiguous narrative between the 'modernity' of a quasi-European nation and the 'tradition' of a rural space.

Second, the urban/rural relationship was also configured in a contradictory way. The rural image shaped within international events clashed with the opposite urban representation of the country that was adopted in the national context. This double articulation of identity reflected the elites' strong organisation of national power around Buenos Aires. During the 1910 Centenary Exhibition, the leading role of the city, along with its technology and fastness, tended to naturalise Buenos Aires' hegemony over the rest of the national space. By means of a positivist and scientifically oriented rhetoric the elites' discourse highlighted the unstoppable leadership of urban life in the modernisation of the country.

Third, closely related the latter point, the urban had to be the place where the national population should be shaped. The analysis of 1898 National Exhibition illustrated that the indigenous populations were portrayed as totally incapable of taking part in Argentina's modernisation. The racial element was strongly deployed to demonstrate the indigenous populations' backward condition that was 'naturally' - and therefore inevitably - preventing them to understand and participate in the modern nation. This was further strengthened in the 1910 Centenary Exhibition where the narration of an alleged 'lack' of history - expressed by the absence of national art - reinforced the project of exclusion of indigenous populations from the national project.

In the meantime, the period investigated was defined by a process of deep social transformations and drastic increase of population that profoundly changed the shape of Buenos Aires, that rapidly became one of the biggest and most iconic Latin America cities, therefore giving further importance to its social and material transformations. The history of the Pavilion - despite its importance was spatially recognised, as it was placed for decades in the core of city - came to an end on the sly in 1933. The priority was given to other works, other urban transformations in order to re-modernise the city centre; and the architectural form which characterised so strongly the national project started in 1880 (and had probably its apogee in 1910) never appeared again. However, that elites' national project, despite of many changes in the government's leadership, outlived the end of the pavilion and continued until 1946, when the political victory of Peronism inaugurated a new phase of Argentina's history which meant a radically different project of national identity. Overall, the Pavilion represented an important institutional place in which the Argentine postcolonial identity was forged and it represented both its desires and contradictions, leaving the Argentine capital incessantly swaying between past and present, Europe and the Americas, West and non-West.

If, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the goal to follow the French/European modern planning and architecture was generally widespread within the Latin American context at the turn of the century, since the 1920s an important rupture was generated in Mexico City. The social revolution carried out by the peasantry in the 1910s brought radical ideas of reorganisation of Mexican society and, also in this case, the capital city was the place in which the message of the socio-political action was energetically expressed. As it will be discussed in the next chapter, also this change would be defined by contradictory concepts and narratives. Mexico City represents a space of extreme importance to see how the postcolonial was differently articulated across Latin America.



## CHAPTER 5. Post-Revolutionary Mexico City: The Palace of Public Education and The Perfect Race (1920-1960)

### *Introduction*

Mexico City's urban transformations between 1920 and 1960 were critically important for Mexican history. After 10 years of civil war, the revolutionary forces were called to rule the country and, accordingly, to forge its national identity. Despite the reasons in favour or against the actual realisation the revolution's principles during this period<sup>61</sup>, the narratives of radical social transformation definitely predominated the public discourse promoted by the state. The Mexican history of the twentieth century cannot be understood without reflecting upon the crucial role played by the revolution. The decade between 1910 and 1920 represented a social and political turning point for the country, which could not avoid to think of the revolution during any attempt of reform or transformation occurring in the following decades.

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<sup>61</sup> Looking at the historiography of the revolution, there have been lively debates about what were the actual dynamics that characterised the course of events. If the decades after the 1920 normally offered triumphalist views of the facts, from the 1960s different interpretations of the revolution began to spread. As Joseph and Nugent noted (Joseph and Nugent 1994), two major and contrasting narratives have characterised the account of the revolution since the 1960s. The first one, describable as *revisionist*, claiming that the events were substantially moved by the national bourgeois which was soon able to control and direct the social movements' struggles, and reinforced its domain through the post-revolutionary state; in other words, the revolution was not a 'simple' popular act against the elites, in fact it could not even scrape the surface of the capitalist structure. The second interpretation, the *neopopulist* one, on the contrary highlighted the importance of the peasantry and the workers in order to stress that that decade constituted an actual attempt 'from below' to overturn the social order; following this view, the uprisings were not just confused and disjointed struggles carried out by *caciques*, but they were actually part of a larger and more structured revolutionary design.



Especially after 1920, the national power was significantly centralised around Mexico City and the capital represented the centre from which this new Mexican era was symbolically and materially organised. By focusing on the renovation of the Palace of Public Education this chapter investigates the specific configuration of the postcolonial state in Mexico during the post-revolutionary period. In particular, a critical figure such as José Vasconcelos will be analysed through his works and speeches. Vasconcelos, Secretary of Public Education from 1921 to 1924, was one of the most prominent intellectuals of the revolution and one of the political and cultural leaders of the first post-revolutionary years. During the period where he was head of the ministry, Vasconcelos led the works on the renovation of the Palace of Public Education and made the building a symbol of his revolutionary principles.

The chapter will examine this case of architectural transformation by focusing particularly on the three processes that represent the analytical lens which are used in this research. First, the post-revolutionary idea of *national population* is explored. Contrary to the case of Buenos Aires discussed in the last part of the previous chapter, the strong intersection between indigenous population and peasantry that defined the revolution generated a claim against any racial hierarchies within the national space. The chapter will see how the architectural shapes of the Palace of National Education reorganised ideas of a colonial and pre-colonial past as crucial elements in order to build the post-revolutionary identity. Second, and closely related to this point, the analysis will explore how the Palace's discourse - by looking at the statues and artwork in the courtyard - aimed to represent Vasconcelos' imagination of Mexico within a *geopolitical dimension*. The chapter will illustrate how, in order to place the country in a prominent position internationally, Vasconcelos formulated the idea of a *Cosmic Race* and reinterpreted the world history (by using also the myth of Atlantis). Furthermore, such an international challenge also involved a

specific imagination with respect to the whole of Latin America, as a response to the imperialist desires displayed by the United States. Third, the chapter will investigate the relationship between *urban and rural* elements through the analysis of Diego Rivera's works in the interior of the Palace of Education, illustrating the specific role that the rural had at the beginning of the post-revolutionary period.

By analysing how temporalities, national population, and national space were materialised in the shapes of the Palace of National Education in Mexico City, the chapter will explore the specific manifestation of the urban enigma in post-revolutionary Mexico. The historical condition of a country that had just experienced the edge of a social revolution created an original postcolonial narrative in which rural space, peasantry, and indigenous populations occupied a central position in the icon transformations of the capital city. Finally, Mexico City changed dramatically since the 1940s. On the one hand, the poorest sectors of the urban population built in neighbourhoods marked by precarious houses and the condition of marginality of their population. On the other, the architectural projects led by the state were increasingly adopting a modernist and functionalist style that shown the definitive removal from the post-revolutionary ideas that defined the early 1920s and was prepared to access a new historical phase in the 1960s.

### ***Urbanising Post-Revolutionary Mexico City***

Mexico City was a showcase for the realisation of post-revolutionary Mexico. It is important to note that "the period 1910-1940 saw not a process of linear legitimation but a sequence of ideological battles, some violent and some peaceful; some fought locally and silently, some nationally and

noisily" (Knight 1994b: 60) and therefore the post-revolutionary period was structured by these contradictory and conflicting conditions<sup>62</sup>. Together with elements such as art, literature, and education, the urban environment - and especially the capital city - represented one of its main protagonists which illuminates the materialisation of these tensions.

During the two decades following the revolution, the city's transformations symbolised the new ideas and values describing the country. The past assumed an important part of the renovation and, both in historical and artistic terms, there was a research aiming to achieve an original mixture of past and present that could express (post)revolutionary identity. This meant the assumption of various styles with the goal of summarising the new character of the nation; especially during the 1920s and 1930s, the revolution triggered an "an unprecedented experimental artistic production" which renewed the character of the Mexican scene (Carranza 2010: 3).

The philosophy of the revolution was materialised in the urban environment, and "much of the focus of the Mexican avant-garde and its architectural explorations [was] centered in the site where and through which the traditional avant-garde operates: the modern metropolis" (Carranza 2010: 4). Mexico City's symbolical centrality, in addition, was coupled with an increase in its population<sup>63</sup>, which went from about 900.000 in 1921 to 1.230.000 in 1930. However, until 1940, both Mexico City and the

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<sup>62</sup> The authors, as editors of an iconic book about Mexico's state formation, made their objective clear: "this volume goes beyond previous work on Mexico because our explicit concern is to fashion an analytical framework for simultaneously integrating views of the Mexican revolution 'from below' with a more compelling and nuanced 'view from above'" (Joseph and Nugent 1994: 12).

<sup>63</sup> A significant growth of Mexico City's population took place during the decade of the revolution, when it rose by 25.7%; in the same period (1910-1920), however, the civil war caused a 5.45% drop in national population. The considerable migration towards the city during the war period is explained as a result of the attempt to escape from the violence, diseases, and scarcity of food which characterised the countryside in those years (Collado Herrera 2003: 42-43).

whole country did not experience a significant change in terms of urban population (Anuario Estadístico de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos 1941 [1943]). This is a fact strictly related to the revolution.

As a consequence of the extremely difficult situation of the peasantry during the *Porfiriato* period, the beginning of the post-revolutionary era was distinguished by the political goal of radically transforming the living condition in the rural areas; this was the key fact that triggered the revolution and was mainly translated in one claim, the agrarian reform. The peasantry, protagonist of the revolutionary actions, tended thus to avoid leaving the countryside and expected reforms that would have improved its material conditions (detailed accounts are in Joseph and Nugent 1994). This was the major element at stake in the post-revolutionary project (see, for example, Vaughan 2006). As a result, the migratory flow towards urban areas which marked the 1910s (see note 63 below) slowed and, hence, represented an exception to the regular rural-to-urban migration that most of Latin American countries were increasingly starting to experience at that time (see chapter 2). As we will see later in the chapter, this situation reached its top during Lázaro Cárdenas's government (1934-1940) when, thanks to the agrarian reform that he promoted, the improvement of the peasants' condition held further the migration from the countryside (Kemper and Royce 1981:14; a detailed study of the national transformations occurred between 1920 and 1940 is offered by López and Rochfort, [2006]).

Between 1920 and 1940 Mexico City underwent a deep physical transformation (Olsen 2008). Only in the 1920s, 32 new *colonias* (neighbourhoods) were built; just to give some prominent examples, Roma Sur was constructed in 1922 and Guadalupe Tepeyac in 1930. Furthermore, throughout the twenty-year period, many colonias were radically renewed, such as the famous Colonia Centro in 1934. In general terms, the upper

classes tended to move towards the western side of the city and, at the same time, central neighbourhoods were dwelled by the poor sectors of the population (Kemper and Royce 1981:22): such a trend meant a reshaping of the capital city also in relation to its social fabric. These new urban configurations clearly followed the attempt of developing an innovative setting able to bring Mexico City, and consequently Mexico as a whole<sup>64</sup>, on the road of *progress* and *modernity* (Burian 1997). As a result, the map of the capital was significantly transformed<sup>65</sup> (Collado Herrera 2003; Escudero 2008).

Planning became a central concern and the need for notable change was perceived as necessary and imminent. As Sergio Miranda Pacheco noted, “it was only in the 1920s that the principles of modern urban planning were introduced in Mexico by a group of Mexican engineers and architects trained abroad; from different positions, during the second and third decade of the twentieth century, these professionals pushed the idea to plan the urban growth of the Federal District as well as of the country until they achieved the Mexican state’s creation of new legislation, together with new national and local institutions, in relation to urban planning” (Miranda Pacheco 2008: 45). The international character (especially French) which accompanied the transformations of Mexico City was already present during the *Porfiriato*, however, at that time the city lacked systematic approach which was able to consistently embrace the whole of

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<sup>64</sup> As discussed in chapter 2, the capital city was often understood as a formidable metonym for the country. With regard to post-revolutionary Mexico City, Olsen remarked this fact and noted that “the nation’s capital is a composite of the national experience in both practical terms, in the administration of a new, at times tentative revolutionary government and in ceremonial/symbolic terms” (Olsen 2009: xiii).

<sup>65</sup> In addition, this transformation was accompanied by the developments of aerial photography in the 1920s which entailed a radical change in the way of producing maps and plans; this, as a consequence, created a different and ‘more scientific’ way of conceiving the city (Escudero 2008: 111-112).

the urban fabric; in most cases, international 'methods' and styles were adopted for single elements such as a palace or a road.

In the wake of the revolution, in addition to the physical configuration of the city, significant changes occurred on the political-administrative side. The most important of these changes most likely took place at the end of the 1920s. Starting from the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1929, Mexico City was governed by the Department of Federal District, an organ that was completely dependent on the national government (precisely the President of the Republic). This entailed the abolition of the municipalities through replaced by a Central Delegation and thirteen districts (*delegaciones*). The crucial novelty was that these local institutions were controlled by the central power and, as a result, Mexico City's population was no longer able to elect the city's government<sup>66</sup>. The capital reinforced its national leadership in political and economic terms, becoming the pivot around which the country's future was to be built.

This process of political centralisation was in line with the general tendency towards the concentration of power around the state which characterised the Mexican post-revolutionary period. It was a conflict between the state and the city in which the state absorbed the city and, at the same time, vice versa, the city became state. The reform received criticisms from some local administrators, especially in regard to the disempowerment of the capital's population (for example, Miranda Pacheco 2008: 47-52, 57-60). However, if on the one hand such a move seemed to clearly contradict the principles of the revolution, on the other, during the 1920s the city was facing several problems. Some of the main difficulties, which could be traced back to the period encompassing the first three decades of the century, consisted in the shortage of housing, the

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<sup>66</sup> This political-administrative system lasted until 1997, when the city's inhabitants eventually recovered the political right to choose their local government.

inadequacy of general infrastructure (especially health infrastructures), juridical issues in relation to property of terrains, and the constant political instability of the city council (Miranda Pacheco 2008: 13, 56). This complex situation created many concerns to the national government and the consequent desire to implement policies which were able to better manage the situation in the capital city. Before being assassinated shortly after the elections for his second mandate as a President, Álvaro Obregón<sup>67</sup> endorsed an initiative in favour of the abolition of the capital's councils and the passage of the city's political control into the hands of the national government. As will be analysed in the following section, Mexico City was reflecting the project of the post-revolutionary country, as well as its contradictions, by experiencing significant transformations that reshaped the idea of national population, the country's geopolitical imagination, and the relationship between urban and rural space. This ambitious postcolonial project will be analysed through the works of renovation of the most iconic buildings in the core of the Mexican capital city: the Palace of Public Education.

### *The Palace of Public Education: Mixed Styles for A New Race*

The post-revolutionary period saw a succession of governments that strongly used the narratives of the revolution in their political discourse. However, although revolutionary ideas were largely hegemonic on the formal level their actual implementation was in fact fully controversial and lively debates have investigated the relationships between the revolutionary principles and the governments that succeeded from the end

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<sup>67</sup> Álvaro Obregón, a crucial figure in the revolution, became the first President of the post-revolutionary period, ruling from 1920 to 1924. After the presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928), Obregón was elected again in 1928, but he was murdered before the starting of the mandate by a young religious militant (see note 68).

of the violent conflict<sup>68</sup>. By investigating the renovations of the Palace of Public Education, this section explores the radical conception of a *national population* that was put forward by the governments in office in the aftermath of the revolution. Before going into the details characterising the works that transformed the building, it is important to outline the extreme importance of education within the post-revolutionary discourse.

The Constitution of 1917 was a crucial achievement of the revolution and among the radical ideas which it contained there was certainly the article 3, which traced the lines of the national educational system. The article established free and obligatory education for all Mexicans and banned any sort of religious influence, therefore formally instituting the secular state in Mexico. The strong attention paid to education reflected the revolution's concern about the importance of culture in order to shape more equal society and, at the same time, it stressed the intention to build the *national identity* through non-religious elements. The early 1920s represented an important period in which these ideas had to prove their durability and efficacy and the post-revolutionary governments immediately pursued this goal.

Obregon, as a first President of the post-revolutionary period, took seriously these indications and in 1921 created the Secretariat of Public Education, a governmental institution forged in order to work exclusively on the organisation of the educational system. The President appointed José Vasconcelos as head of the Secretariat. Vasconcelos, currently director of the National University (appointed on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1920), was already an influential intellectual figure in Mexico: writer, lawyer, philosopher, and totally committed with revolution, he was constantly working on the construction

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<sup>68</sup> The end of the revolution did not signify the complete end of violence; for example, Christian militants rebelled against the anti-religious posture of the post-revolutionary governments, and spread a war across the central Mexican states, known as the Cristero War (1926-1929).



of the national identity that would have defined Mexico's post-revolutionary character in the Americas and beyond. Vasconcelos would become one of the most important figures in twentieth century's Mexican culture. His engagement with education was a focal point from which, in his view, Mexico's renovation had to start<sup>69</sup> (Fell 1989).

In practical terms, following the revolution's basic ideas about education, Vasconcelos' program as a minister was centred on the diffusion of (national) culture over the country. At that time, the revolutionary intellectuals found as an immediate goal the defeat of the high rate of illiteracy<sup>70</sup> and, the diffusion of schools across the country, and especially throughout the rural areas. Following the main principles of the revolution, Vasconcelos had a precise idea of what education should look like in the new Mexico:

“monarchic schools aimed to shape subjected citizens [*súbditos*]; theological schools aimed to shape good priests; despotisms put an effort to create soldiers, and only civilised peoples aim to shape good citizens; that is, free men and women who are able to judge life from their own point of view [...]. This is the kind of man that we aim to create in Mexico, and this is the aim of our educational reform” (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1923a: 5”).

Vasconcelos himself was working on the idea of *Mexican culture*: the minister strongly promoted the spread of public libraries all over Mexican territory, in order to give the opportunity to expand Mexicans' knowledge and, in particular, to disseminate the national culture that the post-

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<sup>69</sup> Octavio Paz within his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude* noted that “if the revolution was a search and an immersion of ourselves in our own origins and being, no one embodied this fertile, desperate search better than José Vasconcelos, the founder of modern education in Mexico” (Paz 1985 [1950]: 142).

<sup>70</sup> In order to achieve this ambitious goal, the Secretariat of Public Education formally invited “intellectuals and teachers” to formally enrol as “missionaries” and go teaching to the countryside (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1923a: 177-178).

revolutionary intellectuals were forging<sup>71</sup>. As a whole, Vasconcelos was trying to carry out a “monumental educational and consciousness-raising campaign in Mexico that was ultimately aimed at all Latin America” (Carranza 2010: 16). For instance, Many years after having held the role as a Minister, Vasconcelos stated that the “Secretariat of Public Education” had become “the center of attention of the Spanish world” and “had the goal of fostering the moral and political rebirth of the Latin world in the face of the powerful nations of the moment” (Vasconcelos 1972 [1963]: 167-168). As well as some central political and intellectual figures in Latin America’s history such as Simón Bolívar and José Martí, throughout his life Vasconcelos envisaged the identity of Latin America as something coherent and united by the same political, cultural, social and, very importantly, ‘racial’ destiny.

Vasconcelos’s idea of national population was specifically conceived of in racialised terms. Within his vast written production, what is probably the most well-known piece of writing is *La Raza Cósmica* (The Cosmic Race), an essay published in 1925 in which Vasconcelos outlined how Mexican/Latin American history gave birth of a distinctive race summarising the best qualities of other races. If there is something that is able to summarise Vasconcelos’ intellectual and political mission, his activity as a minister and, more broadly, the first phase of the post-revolutionary period, this is most certainly the Palace of Public Education.

In order to have a central building functioning as headquarters of the Ministry<sup>72</sup>, the government, following Vasconcelos’ request, decided to renovate a convent constructed in 1629, the *Convento de Nuestra Señora de la Encarnación*. Vasconcelos himself organised the operations and designed

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<sup>71</sup> A detailed discussion about Vasconcelos’ intellectual and political activities between 1920 and 1925 is provided by Fell [1989].

<sup>72</sup> The Ministry’s activities were divided into three sections related respectively to schools, libraries, and fine arts.

the engineer Federico Méndez Rivas for the realisation of the renovation (the works started on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1921). The dimensions of the building were also significant as it counted a surface of 8.500 square meters. As noted by Carranza, the Palace was characterised by both “a symbolic and strategic position” (Carranza 2010: 30); its centrality was not only geographical with respect to the city, it was also metaphorical, being “near the Palacio Nacional (the National Palace, the symbolic center of the executive branch), the National University (as it stood at the time before its move to El Pedregal, an area in the southern part of Mexico City), and the Biblioteca Nacional (National Library)” (Carranza 2010: 30)<sup>73</sup>. In addition, the building was redesigned and spatially organised adopting a neo-colonial style. This fact expressed Vasconcelos’ ideas of involving the colonial past as part of identity of post-revolutionary Mexico.

However, before exploring the various themes which marked the Palace of Public Education, we are going to see how Vasconcelos himself conceived the main features of its renovation. This is the way how he concluded *La Raza Cósmica*:

“In order to express all these ideas that today I am trying to expound in a rapid synthesis, I tried, some years ago, when they were not well defined, to assign them symbols in the new Palace of Public Education in Mexico. Lacking sufficient elements to do exactly what I wished, I had to be satisfied with a Spanish renaissance building, with two courtyards, archways, and passages that give somewhat the impression of a bird’s wing<sup>74</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> The building is built in a portion of soil which enclosed by four roads (current names): *calles de República de Venezuela* on the Northern side, *calle Luis González Obregón* on the Southern, *calle de República de Argentina* on the Eastern, and *calle de República de Brasil* on the Western.

<sup>74</sup> The lack of satisfaction expressed by Vasconcelos was due to the fact that building was projected as the renovation of a seventeenth century convent, thus preventing from a complete autonomy during its physical design. Vasconcelos explicitly mentioned this and noted that “regarding the general style of the building we could not proceed with freedom

On the panels at the four corners of the first patio, I had them carve allegories representing Spain, Mexico, Greece, and India, the four particular civilizations that have most to contribute to the formation of Latin America. Immediately below these four allegories, four stone statues should have been raised, representing the four great contemporary races: The white, the red, the black, and the yellow, to indicate that America is home to all and needs all of them. Finally, in the center, a monument should have been raised that in some way would symbolize the law of the three states: The material, the intellectual and the aesthetic. All this was to indicate that through the exercise of the triple law, we in America shall arrive, before any other part of the world, at the creation of a new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones: The final race, the cosmic race” (Vasconcelos 1997 [1925]: 39-40).

Vasconcelos used the building as an actual mission, as a showcase in which the new Mexican identity was forged and, at the same time, spread through the Ministry’s activities. Primarily, the architectural character of the Palace represents a precise element that described the post-revolutionary ideas about *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) (in relation to Vasconcelos’ ideas of Mexicanness see, for example, Pacheco Finella 1967). The use of the neo-colonial style (see fig. 7 and 8), in the building used together with other styles, was a trait that distinguished the architectural tendency in the years after the revolution. Although from the late 1920s modernist and functionalist models started to progressively occupy the major scene in Mexico City’s urban forms,

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because it was necessary to adapt the new construction to the older annex’s general lines. It was impossible, therefore, to draw a totally new project, but we substantially corrected the old building by replacing the heavy cornice with that one that now adorns it, and by raising all the windows in the first floor” (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1922: 6).

Figure 7 - Palace of National Education. Source: Secretaría de Educación Pública 1924b



the very beginning of the decade was predominantly marked by the symbolical recuperation of the colonial past. Several years after the renovation of the palace, within his autobiographical book *A Mexican Ulysses*, Vasconcelos stressed his idea according to which the building “is the duty of each epoch, and buildings shall be the glory of the new government [...]”; specifically, during his period in office as a Ministry, “we did not want schools of the Swiss type [...] nor schools of the Chicago type [...]. In architecture, too, we should find inspiration in our glorious past” (Vasconcelos 1972 [1963]: 181). This seems to summarise the spirit very well that marked the works in the Palace of National Education. Vasconcelos summarised the spirit marking the project of the palace using the following words:

“we have worked by responding in great detail to the moral transformation of the Republic [...] and by thinking of the favourable destiny in order to construct a building that is a *symbol* [...]; [a symbol] that is solid and clear like the conscience

of the mature revolution” (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1922: 8; emphasis added);

in this sense, the renovation of the palace clearly had to materialise the post-revolutionary socio-political mission. More specifically, in relation to the social hierarchies embodied in the project, the architectural styles adopted in the Palace had a twofold direction; on the one side, it talked as a sort of “reassuring message” to the more conservative sectors of the population

*Figure 8 - Palace of National Education, the courtyard. Source: Secretaría de Educación Pública 1924b*



who were frightened by the goals of the revolution, on the other side, it represented a clear program to those who supported the revolution, indicating that a fundamental element of “Mexico’s future was a recovery of its past” (Olsen 2009: 7). The adoption of the neo-colonial style was mostly the result of Vasconcelos’ office as a minister (Gullien 2004: 9), this was primarily due to two and interconnected reasons. Firstly, the Ministry of Public Education was also responsible for works regarding the fine arts, and therefore for the architectural sector (see note 72 above).

Vasconcelos, thus, occupied a critical position with respect to this sector since, and this is the second reason, the centralisation of the state

reinforced its prominent role in commissioning architectural works. As a result of these two factors, the minister was able to exert a great influence over the style adopted by the architects, who had the necessity to conform to the state's directives in order to work. It is not a case that modernism in architecture started in the mid-1920s, when Calles became president (1924) and Vasconcelos, in strong opposition to him, resigned from his position as a minister. This episode marked a change in the architectural projects and the abandonment of Vasconcelos' syncretic conceptions. In addition to this, Vasconcelos thought of architecture and education as two elements characterised by a mutual positive connection; while describing the objective of increasing the number of schools in Mexico, he wrapped up the discussion by saying that "if we intensely build schools over the next 5 or 10 years [...], we will reach the position of Argentina and the United States" if not, Mexico would have continued to be significantly "inferior" to "countries of our race such as Argentina and Brazil", therefore the question was "to reflect upon the urgency of resolving the problem of education in this country not by means of plans of study but, instead, with architectural plans. Let us make sure that national education goes into the period of architecture" (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1923b: 8).

In regards to the importance of architectural styles, The Palace of Public Education was built using not only the neo-colonial, but a combination of styles. The façade was neoclassical, and the interior included many works painted by Diego Rivera, one of the main protagonists of Mexican modernism. This syncretism precisely reflected Vasconcelos' ideas of Mexico's national identity, as well as the strong relationship that ties architecture and nationalism, especially within postcolonial national projects. As AbdouMalik Simone underlined,

"the built environment is a particularly significant modality through which the nation performs its ubiquity, its immediacy

(its presence in people's lives) and instantaneity (its ability to know what its citizens really want and need) – all of the dimensions of a *simulated divinity* (Simone 2012: 205, emphasis added).

The nation, a 'divinity' that had to extend its values across the country; as a religion, the nationalist ideas needed a way to be efficaciously expressed and shared with the state: architecture is a formidable method to visualise and communicate these concepts to a large public. More precisely, in relation to the Palace of National Education, the materiality of the building consisted in an iconic and heterogeneous language - heterogeneous in the sense of the simultaneous combination of architectural forms along with sculptural and figurative techniques (the murals) - that was able to summarise the leading concepts of the post-revolutionary mission. Noting a distinct relation between the physical shapes of the building and its overall symbolic values, Vasconcelos stated that "the material house [the palace] is completed but the moral building is still slightly visible, and its lineaments are already contained in the lines [*rasgos*] of this house's structure" (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1922: 26). The variety of the architectural languages used in the building makes the relationship between *visuality* and *materiality* particularly effective and articulated. If the "'visual' and the 'material' should be understood as in continual dialogue and co-constitution", as well as in likewise constitutive connection the political (Rose and Tolia-Kelly 2012: 4), the Palace was thus a place in which these components were all emphatically at work by means of the nationalist project.

When considering the importance of the idea of national population, it is important to highlight Vasconcelos' speech on the day of the inauguration of the building (9<sup>th</sup> June 1922) where he explained the new meaning of 'national' in post-revolutionary Mexico. In addition,



Vasconcelos underscored that the renovation of the building was a matter of national elements and specified its significance. He noted:

“we [the leaders of the project] did not accept the services of any single foreign worker, because we wanted that this home [the Secretariat] was, similar to the spiritual work that it has to shelter, a genuinely national enterprise in the wider sense of the term. ‘National’ does not mean pretending to blindly enclose ourselves within our geographical borders but, rather, to propose the creation of the characters of a Hispanic American indigenous culture [*cultura autóctona hispanoamericana*]!” (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1922: 7).

As in the final paragraphs of *La Raza Cósmica*, Vasconcelos emphasised that Mexican national identity had to be conceived as something both regional and international. This is one of his most original contributions to a theme - the national - that was constantly at stake in Latin American countries, which were trapped in those peripheries of history, modernity’s waiting rooms, from which they could not escape. Vasconcelos believed that the way out would be a national culture that was clearly produced in Mexico (contrary to the eccentric fashion for foreign culture that marked Díaz’ regime) but that would stem from the multiplicity of histories (and geographies) which had made ‘Mexico’ throughout the centuries (Fell 1989). Vasconcelos strongly promoted the idea that a new history was starting,

“Now it is Mexican time. After four centuries of shrinking and mutism the [Mexican] race went sad [...]. During these solemn instants the Mexican nation dedicates a palace to the education of the people [...]. Y finally may the light of these pale walls be like the dawn of a new Mexico, of a splendid Mexico] (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1922: 9).

Of course, this idea of Mexico was a cultural ‘invention’<sup>75</sup> shaped on the basis of Vasconcelos’ interconnected concepts of population and national identity. Vasconcelos’ project was extremely interesting and it is able to disclose how the creation of a new and shared concept of the national was perceived as an indispensable act in those years. As he often pointed out, the Palace of Public Education was conceived as the urban form expressing the ambitious desire of forging - both theoretically and through government’s actions - a radically new idea of a Mexican population. As I illustrate in the next section, the building also expressed - according to Vasconcelos’ narration - a renewed geopolitical imagination for post-revolutionary Mexico.

### ***The Courtyards’ Geopolitical Strategy: from Atlantis to Our America***

The renovation of Mexican identity implied a reorganisation of the country, at least at a discursive level, within the international scene. By continuing analysis of the Palace of Public Education this section particularly focuses on the *geopolitical imagination* that characterised Vasconcelos’ post-revolutionary project. In order to do so, Vasconcelos articulated a narration made of socio-historical and geographical elements - mostly created by Vasconcelos himself as we will see shortly - that aimed to demonstrate Mexico’s prominent role internationally.

In order to draw a project of radical renovation of Mexican identity Vasconcelos paid deep attention to the combination of past and a present in order to define the new international character of the country. In doing so,

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<sup>75</sup> By using the term ‘invention’ I want to stress the *artificiality and subjectivity* of the process, in a similar sense to how Hobsbawm and Terence discussed historical narratives such as ‘tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Terence: 1983), or Anderson (2006 [1983]) understood the concept of nation.

Vasconcelos thought of Mexico in the context of world history and projected the country's socio-cultural physiognomy by reflecting upon a variety of places and peoples. While describing the figures carved in the courtyard's boards, he described the reasons for choosing those specific illustrations. First of all, there was

"Greece, distinguished mother of European civilisation from which we are descendance, is represented by a young woman dancing and the name of Plato which encloses all her soul. Spain appears in the caravel that joined this continent with the rest of the world, his cross of the Christian mission and the name of Las Casas, the man who civilised. The Aztec figure reminds indigenous people's refined art and the myth of Quetzalcoatl, the first educator in this area of the world. Finally, the fourth board shows Buddha<sup>76</sup> covered with lotus flowers, like a suggestion saying that in this land and in this Indo-Iberian lineage [*estirpe indoibérica*] there have to join Orient and Occident, North and South, and not in order to clash and destroy each other, but to match and mix into a new, loving, and concise culture" (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1922: 7).

Vasconcelos' view originally organised Mexican identity along the lines of the colonial complexity of world history. If at the first glance his statement could appear as a sort of naïve or unintelligible proposal, it clearly reflected the contradictory questions which are inherent of the postcolonial condition.

On the one hand, there was the desire of participating with full right to the international system. This is a goal that required the

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<sup>76</sup> He called it "India" in *La Raza Cósmica*'s final remarks (see quote above). Probably in order to indicate where Buddhism was born, Vasconcelos seemed to use the word *India* as synonym of *Buddha*.

institutionalisation of a specific, and globally recognised, national history and culture. Yet, simultaneously, this operation consisted in imitating the process of nation building that shaped the European countries, process of 'modernisation' that was seen as inevitable to ascend in the international hierarchies<sup>77</sup>. Or, in a more radical way, Vasconcelos' reasoning seemed even feeling the need for justifying the Mexican existence in the international scene. The fact of recuperating a variety of distant cultural geographies somehow suggests the research of a national legitimisation that is believed to be reached only through the evidence of prestigious cultures inside Mexico's nation. This was also the consequence of the that, as he expressed very succinctly and concisely, "no matter what out theoretical opinions might be, we have to start from the fact that the mestizo is the predominant element in Mexico" (Vasconcelos 1926: 89). As a consequence, his mission contained the objective – not so frequent at that time – to claim the value of the indigenous presence and its centrality within the Mexican and Latin American identity.

Vasconcelos recognised Spain as a civilising power that made possible the progress of Latin America, and not only Spain, but also ancient Greece and India were constitutive parts of Mexican identity. Showing the perception of occupying a peripheral position in the political and cultural world hierarchies, Vasconcelos identified Mexico as the only place in which it was possible to *join* for the first time the North and the South, as well as the Occident and the Orient of the world - although it is not clear what they were precisely<sup>78</sup>. In order to justify this original geography, Vasconcelos

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<sup>77</sup> This fact is nonetheless contradictory: as mentioned in chapter 2, Anderson pointed out how *nationalism* was actually constructed and exerted for the first time during the anticolonial struggles in Latin America, being therefore 'invented' before than in Europe (Anderson 2006 [1983]: 47-65). However, this research explores how Latin American countries attempted to reproduce the European processes of nation building since the end of nineteenth century, normally seeing those examples as inevitable paths for the modernisation process and situating themselves, consequently, somewhere *behind* Europe.

<sup>78</sup> It is interesting to note that Vasconcelos probably referred to India (although vaguely, as mentioned in note 75 above) as the Orient and therefore, using perhaps a metonym,

used the myth of Atlantis as the core of a civilisation from which Latin American identity was initially forged. This relationship was prominently explained at the very beginning of *La Raza Cósmica* where Vasconcelos started from geological elements as evidences of racial and cultural differences:

“In the opinion of respectable geologists, the American continent included some of the most ancient regions of the world. [...] The architectural ruins of legendary Mayans, Quechuas, and Toltecs, are testimony of civilized life previous to the oldest foundations of towns in the Orient Europe. As research advances, more support is found for the hypothesis of Atlantis as the cradle of a civilization that flourished millions of years ago in the vanished continent and in parts of what today is America. The Hiperborean continent, vanished without trace, other than the vestiges of life and culture sometimes discovered under the snows of Greenland; the Lemurians or the black race from the south; the Atlantean civilization of the red men; immediately afterwards, the emergence of the yellow races, and finally the civilization of the white men” (Vasconcelos 1997 [1925]: 7).

Vasconcelos decided to reinvent human history in order to find its dynamics and create a world distinguished by lands and races in which the best combination was presented by Latin America (see de Beer 1966: 290-314; Fell 1989: 553-594 and 639-657; in addition, by the author himself, Vasconcelos 1926). This was the meaning of the courtyard in the Palace of Public Education, as soon as one got into the building - a building that

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inserting Asia in the ‘cosmic race’. However, as we will see, he did not include at all United States in this project, and so it is not really clear what he intended as North. Looking at the world map, it is not even clear what was the South, as all the country he cited (Mexico, Spain, Greece, India) technically belonged to the Northern hemisphere and, at the same time, the First/Third World and North/South (developmentalist) narratives were forged only in the postwar period.

symbolically was the cradle of post-revolutionary national education – they could immediately see the great cultures which made Mexico. Atlantis, the submerged continent island that was thought to be located in the Atlantic Ocean between Europe and the Americas<sup>79</sup>, represented the origin of the ‘red men’, the Americans, a stage which is not illustrated in the Palace but is prominently revealed in the opening of Vasconcelos’ most famous essay, written soon after the renovation of the Palace. The use of this *imaginary geography*<sup>80</sup> allowed him to reconstruct history and to place Latin America in a prominent position in the geopolitics of the world map. The attempt to assign a similar value to the areas of the world (not to all them, for example, Africa and China are excluded) was of extreme significance, as well as that to *decentralise* the Mediterranean and Europe as the apogee of human civilisation.

One year before the publication of *La Raza Cosmica* Vasconcelos exposed the geographies of the cosmic race within the publication of the Secretariat of Public Education. He explained that “the disappearance of the continent of Atlantis caused the fall of the culture and power of the races from which our indigenous populations, in a mysteriously and distant way, are descended from”. Then it was the time of America Latina, which “resulted from the fusion of the blood and culture of *all* antecedent races”,

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<sup>79</sup> Plato, who is known as the father of the myth of Atlantis, situated the island in an undetermined space in the Atlantic Ocean. During the Renaissance, in the era of the geographical explorations following the European discovery of the Americas, the discussion about the actual location of the island reawakened – this was also due to the fact that Europeans were wondering about the origins of American indigenous population – and different locations were given. Vasconcelos seemed to refer to the version according to which the imaginary island was situated between Europe and the Americas (as it is shown in Athanasius Kircher’s famous map in 1644), and Americans were actually descendants of Atlantis’ population (Feder 2014: 204). He said: “the race that we agreed to call Atlantean prospered and declined in America. After its extraordinary flourishing, after having completed its cycle and fulfilled its particular mission, it entered the silence and went into decline until being reduced to the lesser Aztec and Inca empires, totally unworthy of the ancient and superior culture” (Vasconcelos 1997 [1925]: 9).

<sup>80</sup> I draw this expression on Grijalva’s description of Vasconcelos’ discourse on Atlantis as an “imaginary archaeology” [*arqueología imaginaria*] (Grijalva 2004: 337).

that is, “the universal race” and “the future world will be built upon this race” (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1924a: 18; emphasis added). Vasconcelos’ reconstruction of world human geography had the evident goal of deconstructing the Eurocentric geographical narratives which marked the discipline since the European conquest of the Americas. Of course, Vasconcelos did not use this critical terminology which appeared only in the last part of the twentieth century. As discussed in chapter 1, cartography and geography played a crucial role in determining as the (colonial) world was imagined and conceptualised (Wood 1992; Farinelli 2009). More specifically, the ‘discovery’ of a new continent revolutionised the way the Europeans conceived the world map and the maps produced since then made it evident the new colonial hierarchies through the spatial organisation, and its symbols, within the new global maps (Mignolo 1995: 259-313; 2005; 2014).

Thus, Vasconcelos’ creative act of Atlantis - that is, his rearticulation of the global geography through a renovation of human history - constituted a challenge to the “epistemic privilege” marking by the colonial mapmaker (Mignolo 2014). Although not framed in these terms, this *political move* aimed to subvert the hegemonic narratives that envisioned Latin America naturally situated in a subaltern position in the global landscape. Vasconcelos’ innovative historical geography ‘demonstrated’ instead the equality between the continents; and it was even more than equality, as the cosmic race was the highest combination of human races.

As Vasconcelos stressed in the very first lines of *La Raza Cósmica*, archaeology was able to detect urban architecture in the Americas *before* the of *towns* in Oriental Europe, fact that, following a linear conception of progress and civilisation, indicated the significance of the pre-Columbus Americas within human history. In doing so, Vasconcelos broke the sharp

distinction between the Old World and the New World, giving back to the latter the importance and prestige of its history. As he explicitly noted,

“if we are, then, geologically ancient, as well as in respect to the tradition, how can we still continue to accept the fiction, invented by our own European fathers, of the novelty of a continent that existed before the appearance of the land from where the discoverers and conquerors came?” (Vasconcelos 1997 [1925]: 8).

Vasconcelos reworked history and returned dignity to the Americas’ past through historical and geographical coordinates made of elements which were profoundly contradictory. The original operation was exerted by using a myth, that of Atlantis, coming from the culture of ancient Greece, therefore building the new history with elements alien to American pre-Columbus age, elements which were somehow paradoxically used to legitimate Latin America’s prestige. Vasconcelos yet remarked the great and contradictory admiration he had for Europe (Garrido 1963: 65-72; de Beer 1966: 243-289).

Europeans were at the same time as *fathers* and *conquerors*. This is the genealogy: “with the decline of Atlanteans, the intense civilization was transported to other sites and changed races. The Aryans mixed with the Dravidians to produce the Hindustani, and at the same time, by means of other mixtures, created Hellenic culture” – it is interesting to note here the complete overlapping between *race* and *culture* – “Greece laid the foundations of Western or European civilization; the white civilization that, upon expanding, reached the forgotten shores of the American continent in order to consummate the task of re-civilization and re-population” (Vasconcelos 1997 [1925]: 9). Therefore, after *recovering the memory* of the Americas, the Europeans decided to cross the Atlantic and *civilise again* those vast territories. In the prologue of his famous book about Ibero-American culture called *Indologia*, Vasconcelos talks about New York in a



fascinated and yet somehow obscure way<sup>81</sup>, and concludes his description by saying: “at least in New York, the new world’s port, imposes on us its vitality; and we wake up from the semi-dream left by Europe, the continent where things have already been done and we strengthen ourselves with the aura of the continent where things are being done” (Vasconcelos 1927: XI).

Put in this way, the colonial domination was still seen as an emancipatory project; Vasconcelos’ revaluation of the colonial architecture during his period as a minister was a clear sign of positive attitude towards the colonial past. The Palace of Public Education, and more in general the project of post-revolutionary renovation, paradoxically contained both the evidence of colonial relationships and at the same time the desire to break them. This fact makes Vasconcelos’ operation clearly *postcolonial*, in the sense that on the one hand he claimed a rupture within the history moulded by colonial powers, on the other he rearticulated in many aspects the colonial discourse. For example, Vasconcelos explicitly underlined that

“the Indian has no other door to the future but the door of modern culture, nor any other road but the road already cleared by Latin civilization. The white man, as well, will have to depose his pride and look for progress and ulterior redemption in the souls of his brothers from other castes. He will have to diffuse and perfect himself in each of the superior varieties of the species, in each of the modalities that multiply revelation and make genius more powerful” (Vasconcelos 1997 [1925]: 16).

Race constituted one of the most powerful elements that shaped and legitimised Western colonial adventure in the Americas and beyond; at the same time, it functioned as a critical apparatus in organising Latin

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<sup>81</sup> For example, shortly after describing the city’s “splendid outlook” he ambiguously states that “it is true that New York has the whole *ugliness* of the rest of the world, but it also has the audacities, the unique audacities of the past two centuries” (Vasconcelos 1927: IX-X, emphasis added).

America's post-independence societies (Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Roseblatt 2003; Wade 2010), Vasconcelos reappropriated this category and tried, as well as in the case of geography, to use it in a way that positively distinguished, instead of discriminating, *the whole of* Mexican nation. However, despite Vasconcelos' project all the different 'races' - white, red, black, and yellow, as he explicated in *La Raza Cósmica*'s final lines (see above) - his mission was far from being uncritically inclusive.

The production of a thought based on somehow bizarre components such as the geological and the racial ones, laid on the desire to find a 'scientific' explanation to the right to play an independent role not only as a country, but also as Latin America. This work was due the strong perception of a geopolitical pressure, that is, the United States' imperialism. As mentioned in chapter 1, since 1826 the United States through the Monroe Doctrine made explicit that 'Latin' America<sup>82</sup>, directly or indirectly, was seen as something *inherently* under their political control. Mexico was one of the first countries to experiment the aggressive attitude which would characterise Washington's foreign policy throughout the twentieth century and beyond: the invasion of Mexico (the Mexican-American War, 1846-1848) signified the loss of almost one third of its total territory. The Spanish-American War in 1898, involving the dominion of Cuba and the Philippines, was the 'official' beginning of United States' imperialist period. From then, people's skin in the territories southern to the United States, "became

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<sup>82</sup> I put the word *Latin* in quotes in order to stress the racial definition of the part of the America which lays at the south of the United States (see chapter 1). Thinking of the relationship between Latin America and the United States from 1826, *Latin* highlights the racial connotate of something somehow inferior which does not deserve to be 'fully' American, idea generating the fact that by saying 'America' or 'Americans' the reference is exclusively to the United States and their people - as something *pure* and *truly* American which does not need any (racial) adjectivisation to be identified. Thinking instead of Canada, there is the same distinction between America(ns) and not fully America(ns) but, as imagined as 'white', it is something which is not necessary to be racialised: in this case the North/South distinction help keep the difference. However, why is Mexico not considered as 'North America' despite being in the northern side of the hemisphere and geographically belonging to the northern American continent?

darker and darker” (Mignolo 2005: 90), as a result of the northern narratives based on *whiteness*.

Vasconcelos’ discourse on the cosmic race captured the Mexican and, more in general, Latin American concerns about the northern neighbour and consisted of the production of an account in which the racial component was a prominent argument. To this respect, within a lecture given at the Argentine University of La Plata, Vasconcelos said: “we think that there is not race until we cross the United States’ border and we find out that we have already been classified, and even before we had the opportunity to define ourselves” (Vasconcelos 1934: 21). The hierarchical and racial division of the Americas, and the consequences for Latin America, was one of the biggest concerns in Vasconcelos’ mind and, strategically, he argued for the racial element as a defensive option<sup>83</sup>.

In order to place Mexico in the important position in the international map, Vasconcelos stated that “Mexico shares the duty to improve the world with the most advanced nations” and, as a spontaneous question, he rhetorically asked “what nation is better than Mexico in doing that given its originality, tradition, lineage [*estirpe*] and environment?” (Vasconcelos 1923a: 15-16). He then immediately and importantly argued:

“however, the case of Mexico is not an isolated case; Mexico is only one of the twenty nation sharing the same blood and language, nations that are separate for new but soon or later they will have to unify. They will unify because the feeling of race is even more vigorous than that of patriotism” (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1923a: 16).

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<sup>83</sup> Vasconcelos, more explicitly and decisively, added: “we Latin American people are the only race which is insensible to the clamour of the time calling us to join for our interest and lineage [...], someday this will make the America’s Spanish nations join to discuss their destiny” (Vasconcelos 1934: 91).

From this perspective, Vasconcelo's work can be interpreted as a justification of the Mexican existence through *a racial discourse* that, after having been at the core of the colonial adventure, was strongly rearticulating itself during that postcolonial/imperialist<sup>84</sup> phase. In this sense, race was defined as a *problem* in Latin America and, very interestingly, during a lecture he gave at the University of Chicago, Vasconcelos talked about the higher civilisation of the indigenous populations which were conquered by the Spaniards than those living in the northern lands conquered by the English. He therefore claimed that in the first case the indigenous populations could be integrated in the new society, namely in that of Latin American people (Vasconcelos 1926: 75-102).

Regarding the new perils of the postcolonial period, as well as the feeling of incomplete independence, Vasconcelos is quite explicit:

“Armed rebellion was not followed by a rebellion of the consciences. We rebelled against the political power of Spain and yet did not realise that, together with Spain, we fell under the economic and moral domination of a race that has been mistress of the world since the demise of Spain greatness. We shook off one yoke to fall under a new one” (Vasconcelos, 1997 [1925]: 34).

These lines seem to insert Mexican thinker in the wake of Latin American anti-imperialism rather than within a dark and somewhat simplistic racial prospective. As well as Simón Bolívar and José Martí, Vasconcelos conceived the Latin American landscape as a way, the only one, to achieve an actual and durable autonomy. Especially with Martí - their lives had been relatively close temporally - Vasconcelos shared a similar geopolitical project of reunification of Latin America on the basis of an anti-imperialist perspective (imperialism at that moment meant the United States' threat)

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<sup>84</sup> Regarding the relationship and closeness of the two terms, see Young 2001.

having at its centre the idea of a *mestizo* population, a mixture resulting from the combination of indigenous population and European descendants<sup>85</sup>. However, it is also interesting to see how Vasconcelos hierarchised American indigenous populations themselves, and used these alleged differences to further explain the greatness of the cosmic race. For instance, he explained that

“our Indians [...] are not *primitive* as was the Red Indian, but old, century-tried souls who have known victory and defeat, life and death, and all of the mood of history. [...] [They] represented a certain type of civilization and consequently were not as the North American Indian simply tribes of natives, wandering tribes of hunters, because this in itself perhaps explains why the Spaniard had to mix with the Indian, while the Englishman did not mix but simply forced the Indian back” (Vasconcelos 1926: 79; emphasis added).

Along these lines, Vasconcelos’ cosmic race can be seen as a sort of *genetic opportunity*, or advantage, to build a political and cultural option with the aim to defend Latin America from the hazard coming from the north. Within the cultural dimension of this geopolitical project, the opportunity was also presented in *urban terms*. Vasconcelos stressed that “Mexico has universities before Boston, and libraries, museum, newspapers and a theater before New York and Philadelphia” (Vasconcelos 1972 [1963]: 160). This confirms Carranza’s efficacious remarks on this element:

“for Vasconcelos, the opposite of *Universópolis* was “Anglown,” which he defined as a metropolis. Spengler used

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<sup>85</sup> It is interesting to see the contrasting words in relation to the cosmic race Vasconcelos used in moments of disappointment. For instance, when speaking to a friend (the Mexican historian and journalist Alfonso Taracena) in a private letter in 1934 and stressing the lack of dignity and honour of Latin American society, he said that he doubted that “the poor hybrid race” has ever had these two qualities, adding that such a race “is today ripe of putrefaction” (Vasconcelos 1959: 145-146).

the term “metropolis” to define the material, architectural expression of a civilization at its peak and, therefore, on its way into decline. From Anglotown, colonizing troops were to be dispatched to conquer the world and eliminate rival races. This was clearly a part of Vasconcelos’ critical campaign against American civilization and its meddling in Latin American affairs” (Carranza 2010: 26).

From this side and by considering *mestizaje* as a necessary element for the definition of Latin America in relation to the invasiveness of the northern neighbour, Vasconcelos’s work can be situated within the genealogy of Latin America’s anticolonial and antiimperialist thinkers<sup>86</sup>. These latter, from Simón Bolívar onwards, understood the strong political collaboration between Latin American countries as the only way to achieve the area’s stability<sup>87</sup>. For instance, the mentioned lecture he gave in La Plata was titled ‘Hispano-America facing the aggressive nationalism of Europe and the United States’ (*Hispanoamérica frente a los nacionalismos agresivos de Europa y Norteamérica*) (Vasconcelos 1934). This kind of approach was in line with a conception of Latin America as a *people* unified by a geopolitical mission that was at the same time historical and cultural. To give another example, when reflecting back upon the attempt to build a truly independent national culture during his experience as a Ministry of Education, he noted:

“In the United States, the independent journals devoted space to the work going on in Mexico and praised it, but soon the bankers began to prick up their ears [...]. Frankly, nobody in the North was pleased by the nationalistic and southern rather than the

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<sup>86</sup> With this regard, the Cuban intellectual Roberto Fernández Retamar noted that in *The Cosmic Race*, despite being a “a book as confused as the author himself” it was “full of intuitions” (Fernández Retamar 1989: 5).

north-oriented turn which our activities were so conspicuously taking" (Vasconcelos 1972 [1963]: 168).

Once again, Vasconcelos saw the United States as a country whose hegemony was expressing in multiple ways and culture as well was a field of battle that divided the America into parts. Thus, looking at Vasconcelos' Latin Americanist attitude, in addition to Bolívar, it is fundamental to recall at least José Martí, the Cuban revolutionary who at the end of the nineteenth century prefigured Latin America's antiimperialist battle under the name of Our America (*Nuestra América*) (see, for example, Saldívar 1991). Thus, this part of Vasconcelos' thought can be seen within this genealogy that experienced one of its apogees in the 1964 Tricontinental Conference in Habana when, in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution (1959), Latin America's antiimperialist goals were expanded through a geopolitical alliance with the Africa and Asia (this latter event was discussed, framing it in a similar postcolonial genealogy, by Young 2001: 204-217)<sup>88</sup>. The Latinamericanist perspective was visible also in the Secretariat of Public Education's bulletins, there were very frequently specific sections about events, relationships and questions about Latin America (see, for instance, Secretaría de Educación Pública 1922, 1923a, 1923b, 1924a), fact that shows Vasconcelos' strong intention to embrace a regional perspective. For example, within a letter that Vasconcelos wrote to the "Colombian youth" (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1923a: 601-607; emphasis added), he declared that "the mix of races and cultures [...] was defeated in North America" because such a mix "was transformed into Northamericanism" whereas in Latin America it

"can be rescued if the *Iberian* ductility and force set the bases for a model which is truly universal. [...] The conscience of this

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<sup>88</sup> Among many other examples, this antiimperialist discourse was central also in the more recent case of Venezuela, which the president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) renamed as Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

mission embraces all Latin American countries, and it drives to Latinamericanism [...]. We want the union of the Iberian peoples, without excluding Spain and including Brazil as well; we have to exclude the United States, not because of hate, but because they represent another expression of human nature” (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1923a: 603; emphasis added).

This letter is able to summarise very well Vasconcelos’s geopolitical imagination. On the one hand, he was engaged with the combination of multiple geographies crossing several regions of the world, geographies that set Mexico in some contradictory relationships with Europe and its colonial past. Yet, in spite of his sort of openness in terms of imagining Mexico as the product of a racial mix that crossed the globe, he expressed strong (geopolitical) concerns about the United States, a country that he even labelled as *another expression of human nature*.

### *Inside the Palace: The Countryside in The City*

The role of the palace as a sort of national workshop was crucially increased by Vasconcelos’ decision to appoint the well-known painter Diego Rivera in order to decorate the interior of the building. This choice led to the creation of an impressive narration defining post-revolutionary Mexico’s ambitions by means of a monumental collection of visual representations that was spreading all over the palace’s walls. Rivera, as a strong supporter of the revolution, paid particular political attention to the role of the peasantry and indigenous population in new country - an element that was at the core of its artistic discourse. This section will explore Rivera’s murals in the Palace by specifically considering the urban/rural relationship as a main site of exploration. In Mexico’s post-revolutionary context, the rural



acquired a strong importance due to the force exerted by peasantry and indigenous population in throughout the 1910s. As we are going to see, it occupied a crucial role in the representation of the country even within an iconic palace placed at the heart of the capital city.

Rivera's works in the Palace of Public Education constituted an important legacy left by the Mexican painter. The size of the assignment was huge: the minister designed Rivera to paint the walls of the building and undertake a task that would last years, namely from 1923 to 1928. As Vasconcelos anticipated on the day of the inauguration

“for the corridor, our great artist Diego Rivera already sketched figures of ladies having dresses typical of each Republic's state; and for the stairs he conceived an ascendant decoration which starts from the sea level and its tropical vegetation, then turns into a plateau and finishes with volcanoes” (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1922: 7-8).

By 1928, Rivera would paint the courtyard, the majority of the three floors making the building, as well as the stairs joining them: it was a monumental work illustrating the post-revolutionary Mexican nation.

As with architecture, figurative art was a powerful tool to represent the post-revolutionary project and make it intelligible to a large proportion of people from any social extraction. Mural painting was clearly very effective at this purpose, and the adoption of such art in embellishing the Palace made that message able to reach the majority of Mexicans. Rivera was obviously aware of this fact, which corresponded to the aim to spread his political ideas; he explicitly stated that,

“on the other hand, everybody knows how abundantly religious mural painting has been adopted since the time of the Conquest [of the Americas], as it speaks a language that even those who do

not speak Spanish or Latin understand, this is the reason why such painting has been used for political, social, and religious purposes, at any time and in any place" (Suárez 1962: 133).

Rivera's works in the Palace of the Public Education showed the project for a new Mexico.

His frescoes portrayed what the artist conceived as Mexico's people: miners, armed peasants (symbol of the revolution), workers, and indigenous population were the protagonists of national redemption. As the painter commented, "being the Secretariat of Public Education, more than any public building, the building of the people [...], its decoration's theme could not be different from the life of the people itself" (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1984: 11). And the life of Mexicans at the beginning of the twentieth century was largely belonging to the countryside. The heroes of the revolution, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata just to give two examples, came from the countryside. The rural life was a fundamental component of Rivera's depiction of Mexico.

Rivera was not only sympathising with revolutionary ideas, but was also a communist militant. This fact was very important for the interest that his work attracted at that time, in Latin America and beyond. A few years after the 'shock' of the Russian revolution (1917), the institutionalisation of an artist deeply dedicated to the communist cause, was an event which received at least a strong attention. Mexico felt to be at the entrance of a period of radical transformation as well, feeling shared especially within the communist and anarchist environments. For example, the intellectual and leader of labour movement Rosendo Salazar stated that "among the world's great innovators there is the deep certainty that soon the core of a new social structure will be established in Mexico" (Salazar 1926: 19). These words were expressed in political work that Salazar wanted to be illustrated by the work of Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, the main interprets

(along with David Alfaro Siqueiros) of Mexican muralism. Rivera's work was inseparable from his own political beliefs.

In 1929, in a book published in New York presenting Rivera's works, it was noted that

"from many quarters of the world, travellers who are almost pilgrims have already begun to journey to see these frescoes. There are painters and architects and students of art to whom the walls proclaim a new era in painting; there are leader and propagandist of social revolution who, from whatever land, and however ignorant of the art of painting, understand and are refreshed by the vision in the Ministry [of the Public Education] patios" (Rivera 1929: 9)

and finally, making clear the radical novelty of the centrality of indigenous culture:

"historians and lovers of ancient Mexico recognise at once that however indebted to Europe for technique the artist has been, the vitality on the frescoes owes far more to the Indian classical tradition of the old monuments, and the pure aesthetic zest of the popular arts and the daily life of the Indian nation" (Rivera 1929: 9-10).

Rivera's strong intention to show the crucial importance of indigenous population in (post-revolutionary) Mexico's identity echoed well beyond the national borders: "these pictures must be seen. It is not possible to describe the feelings they have the power to arouse. To artists and to the rank and file of mankind alike, here is a painter who lives in a new era" (Rivera 1929: 36). Thus, appointing a figure such as Diego Rivera for decorating the Palace of Public Education was a choice that underscored

Vasconcelos' wide understanding of social transformation and his will of involving different sectors of Mexican society in the national process.

As an example of Rivera's narrative strategy, he painted in the ground floor the famous frescoes representing a young female teacher teaching young students in the open countryside (fig. 9); next to them there was an armed man on the horse, a guardian of the revolutionary order, and scenes of rural life in the background. Education and peasantry were the absolute symbols of the revolution and as stressed earlier in this chapter, the role of teacher was considered as of crucial importance. Vasconcelos strongly argued that "only teachers are able to create this rescuer generation [*generación salvadora*], this generation which is actually revolutionary, and which does no longer deify men but demands that laws are respected" (Secretaría de Educación Pública 1924a: 864). Moreover, in Rivera's figure, as well as in most of his work in the Ministry building, it is possible to note the aforementioned reference to the pre-Hispanic art by looking at the essential shape of the people portrayed. Within a central building at the core of the transforming capital city, the rural life was the protagonist of the narrative. Contrary to many examples of urban modernisation which were seen as emancipation from the 'backward' countryside (such as in the case of Argentina, as discussed in chapter 4), in post-revolutionary Mexico, the countryside was not an element to be ashamed of, or to overcome, but it was actually a matter of putting an end to its exploitation in which the 'victims' were the peasantry and the indigenous population.

Education, as it was stressed by the attention given Ministry of Public Education, the ministry himself, the renovation of the Palace, and Rivera's works, was a crucial tool in order to achieve that goal. And education in the countryside meant also education of indigenous populations. While describing the beginning of his activity as a Minister of

*Figure 9 - The New School Fresco (1923). Source: Diego Rivera. Paintings, Murals, Biography, Quotes (on-line source)*



Education, Vasconcelos' highlighted his preoccupation about how to build an actual inclusion of indigenous populations in Mexican society:

"I insisted that the Indian Department should have no other purpose than to prepare the native to enter the common school by giving him the fundamental tools in Spanish, since I proposed to go contrary to the North American Protestant practice of approaching the problem of teaching the native as something special and separate from the rest of the population" (Vasconcelos 1972 [1963]: 152).

At the same time, however, Vasconcelos' and Rivera' views were not totally similar, and it is not possible to see their collaboration as something free from tensions. Rivera's Marxist thought was in contrast to many Vasconcelos' ideas such as, for example, the teleological conception of cosmic race that somehow blurred the indigenous population's role and identity, the absence of class differences within political discourse and, more in general, a liberal-reformist perspective as a path generated by the revolution (diverging from Rivera's communist position). For instance, in relation to communism (being the Russian revolution a relatively recent event at that time), Vasconcelos argued that "some extremists in our continent betray human progress with the pretext of being waiting for the total revolution and they make themselves available to collaborate with barbaric dictatorships" (Vasconcelos 1934: 47). However, we have seen above, this did not prevent them to share the radical project of change in the education sector. A reflection upon Vasconcelos' relationship to socialism are offered by Garrido (1963: 109-116).

As part of that ambitious project of national identity the urban and the rural were not seen as oppositional elements symbolising diverse stages of modernisation or development, but in a different way in which the countryside, its inhabitant, and its culture were represented at the core of the post-revolutionary imagination. This represented an evident ambiguity in the postcolonial articulations of national identity in which elements related to agrarian space - such as population, rural economy, culture - were normally associated to a substantial backwardness in opposition to the progressist forces contained in spaces rapidly urbanised (see chapter 2).

Nonetheless, although the revolutionary imaginary kept driving the narratives of Mexican politics, the urban environment - and particularly

Mexico City – started to change dramatically, presenting issues related to a dramatic increase in its population. As with most of Latin American countries in the mid-twentieth century, Mexico experienced a radical social transformation which profoundly transformed the shape of its capital: in a few years Mexico City turned into one of the biggest urban centres in the world.

### *Towards the 1960s: Urban Dystopias*

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, between 1920 and 1940 Mexico did not experience significant changes in population. During this period there was a notable increase in the number of small urban centres throughout the country and, although Mexico City's population increased steadily, there had not been dramatic leaps. Since 1940 the national population began to grow exponentially, and the rural-to-urban migration overcrowded the largest urban centres, and particularly Mexico City. The discrepancy between the two periods is notable.

The 1930s were characterised by the Lázaro Cárdenas presidency (1934-1940) which was one of the most radical, in the sense of vicinity to the revolution's ideals, within the post-revolutionary period. Cárdenas' most remembered action is the nationalisation of the oil companies in 1938, which provoked the anger among the international community, with particular regard to the United Kingdom and the United States, the countries which had the most interests at stake in the sector. This action is remarkable as it consisted of a challenge to the traditional economic asymmetries that described Latin American countries as suppliers of primary goods and raw materials within the global scene (see chapter 1). Calling into question those asymmetries through the national sovereignty represented a dangerous

example for the world leading countries' view, example that could have been followed in similar 'peripheral' countries, in Latin America and beyond.

In order to stimulate a substantial improvement in the condition of the peasantry, Cárdenas carried out an agrarian reform that deepened the elements introduced by the former post-revolutionary governments. The greatest novelty of the reform consisted in the introduction of the *ejido* system, which consisted of the assignment of small portions of land (expropriated from the landlords) to landless peasants. Overall, Cárdenas' agrarian reform distributed 18 million hectares of land to the peasantry. Thus, from 1920 to 1940, the revolution's ideas expressed in the making of the public education had a concrete influence over a country in which the rural life was still seen as a prominent part and the city was not necessarily thought as an indisputable sign of modernisation. This had tangible effects by keeping relatively stable relationship between city (see Olsen 2008: 121-168) and countryside: the changes occurred in rural areas in terms of education (the literacy campaign) and the significant dismantlement of big property (as a consequence of the agrarian reform) made the countryside a place in which the perspective of a decent life was possible, therefore preventing a massive migration towards the main urban areas<sup>89</sup>. The situation would change noticeably since 1940.

If, following Kemper and Royce, in post-independence Mexico there had been a "constant dialect between city and countryside, with a balance of power swinging from one side to the other depending on the [contextual] conditions" (Kemper and Royce 1981: 34), 1940s represent undoubtedly a period in which that balance shifted towards the city side, rapidly and dramatically. In order to achieve a rapid modernisation of the country, the

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<sup>89</sup> This does not mean to overlook (or to forget) Mexico City's drastic process of centralisation of power from 1920, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.



governments in office after Cárdenas promoted a massive flow of investment in the industrial sector, the support of private initiative within the market, the expansion of the transport system (through public capital), elements that quickly enhanced the migration towards the big urban centres. In addition to this, the improvements in medicine and health system allowed a drastic increase in national population. Only in Mexico City the population grew from 1.757.530 in 1940 to 3.050.442 inhabitants in 1950, until reaching the figure of 4.870.876 in 1960. Overall, the national population almost doubled in those two decades, raising from 19.417.937 in 1940 to 36.911.123 in 1960<sup>90</sup>. On the other hand, contrary to the previous two decades, the country experienced a drastic decrease in the small urban centres (Ramos 1970)<sup>91</sup>. Just to give an idea about this aspect of the change, if the rural population increased from 14.800.534 in 1950 to 17.218.011 in 1960, the urban population grew from 10.983.483 to 17.705.118 in the same interval of time, thus inverting the tendency to a substantial equal increase that characterised the 1920-1940 period.

Overall, Mexico City reinforced its role of hegemonic centre over the national space. The import-substitution policies applied since 1940, as a result of the fall of the international economy caused by World War II, created significant investments in the industrial sector, especially in the capital's areas; in addition, in order to make the change sustainable, the government implemented policies to keep low the food prices, therefore worsening the quality of life in the countryside. These elements were crucial in triggering a widespread migration from rural areas, and Mexico City was

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<sup>90</sup> However, the change did not always occur abruptly; the 1930s already showed some tendencies towards those elements that would characterise the following decades. For example, although still far from the rates achieved in the 1940s and 1950s, the population began to increase significantly in both the country (from 16.552.722 inhabitants in 1930 to 19.653.552 in 1940) and the largest urban centres; Mexico City population rose from 1.229.576 people in 1930 to 1.757.530 in 1940) (Anuario Estadístico de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos 1960-1961 [1963]).

<sup>91</sup> By 'small urban centres' [*localidad menores*] Ramos means places having no more than 4999 inhabitants.

undoubtedly one of the favourite destinations. Of course this had a huge impact on the capital's urban environment.

In spatial terms, the city expanded dramatically, particularly in its northern and southern sides<sup>92</sup> (Unikel 1976: 137). With respect to the symbolic architecture such as public buildings and monuments, international style and modernism were used already in the 1930s, but it was since the 1940s that "modernism and functionalist orthodoxy" became prominent in state's buildings, in accordance with the ideology characterising the remarkable acceleration in economic growth (Ward 1990: 216). Far from seeing any prestige or importance in the past, this functional conception of architecture was in line with a likewise practical, and somehow positivistic, conception of economy. However, migrant flows that fuelled the capital's population rapidly created a shortage of housing, in a way that neither the public nor the private sectors were able to provide houses to the new inhabitants. Vasconcelos' and Rivera's national project can be seen as clearly defeated if we considered this historical period.

Despite the governments put forward several actions, especially in terms of building new accommodation in order to ameliorate the housing situation in the capital, the spread of poor neighbourhoods, generated by land occupation or also by some rent speculations (Ward 1976), was a phenomenon that, although it started in the 1930s, was increasingly describing Mexico City's urbanisation. This involved the existence of spaces defined by extremely poor dwellings, generally made of wood or carton, which often lacked basic facilities. In the decade between 1940 and 1950 the annual population growth rate in Mexico City topped at 5.7% (Cisneros Sosa 1993: 124-127; further details are in *Anuario Estadístico de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos 1960-1961* [1963]) and this kind of urban settlements

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<sup>92</sup> The central part of the city experienced a drop in population (in relative terms) for 20 years starting from 1950 (Unikel 1976: 137). Therefore, the vast majority of migrants lived, usually dwelling in precarious accommodation in the capital's outskirts.

spread significantly. They were called *colonias proletarias* (literally 'proletarian neighbourhoods') which is the Mexican equivalent for 'slums'<sup>93</sup>, in 1952 they composed 23% of the city's built environment and 14% of its population (Ward 1976: 330). If from 1930 to 1953 this kind of urban settlements spread in the central parts of the city, in the following years they expanded predominantly in the peripheral areas of the capital that, year by year, was rapidly enlarging its perimeter.

Thus, the project of building the country upon balanced relationships between rural and urban life could clearly be seen in crisis in the 1950s. The significant migration from the countryside did not normally correspond to a better life in the city; Mexico City could not contain the rapid growth of population and became soon a world example of a huge urban area marked by large spaces of social marginalisation and exclusion. The theme of the capital's transformation was largely represented also in the emerging sector of Mexican cinema. As a result of the great world powers' economic difficulties during the world war which involved also the film industry, Mexican cinema expanded significantly and experienced a 'Golden Age' that encompassed the 1940s and the 1950s. Among the many subjects represented, the Mexicanness was one of the protagonists of the narrations and Mexico City's social transformations were often the core of the history. Particularly, the problems, challenges, and violence of the urban life had the *barrio* (the neighbourhood) as a new scene of Mexican life (Tuñón 2003). Despite the differences and contradictions within the Golden Age's works<sup>94</sup>, it was clear that a new social context was shaping the country and Mexico City's life contained many of the characters and

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<sup>93</sup> In Latin America there is usually a different name for slums depending on the country: for example, they are called *Villas Miserias* in Buenos Aires, *Favelas* in Brazilian cities.

<sup>94</sup> Generally speaking, institutional cinema tended to produce movies in which the city was a successful synonym for progress and modernity, whereas other movies broke this idyllic discourse showing the extreme poverty and injustice marking the big city. Luis Buñuel's movies, among which the famous *Los Olvidados*, (literally, 'the forgotten ones') is one of the most prominent examples belonging to the latter group (Tuñón 2003).

contradictions defining this transformation. As mentioned in chapter 2, the 1950s and 1960s. were the decades in which a dramatic growth of population took place throughout Latin America, and this process was coupled by a dramatic expansion of the largest cities. It was what Quijano called “the urbanisation of Latin America society” (Quijano 1975), a *process* which had not only quantitative elements but also qualitative ones, such as a complex transformation in the relationships between urban and rural, in which the former became under many aspects crucially dominant. Mexico City was undoubtedly one of the most prominent examples of this radical change across Latin America.

## ***Conclusion***

Mexico’s post-revolutionary period represented the attempt to build a new country which could break with inequality and injustice that characterised its history since the colonial time. The revolution was a formidable drive coming mostly from rural areas and the countryside; as a result, peasants and indigenous people had been crucial figures in the process of reconfiguration of Mexican national identity. This project was particularly evident in the 1920s and 1930s, when the ‘rural question’, translated for example into the massive literacy campaign in the countryside and a succession of agrarian reforms, was a prominent part of the government’s policies. The process of transformation, at the same time, was reflected into the ‘modernisation’ of Mexico City.

The Palace of Public Education was one of the most important projects in this sense. Vasconcelos elaborated the renovation of the palace as a powerful metaphor for the renovation of the country and, as he explicitly explained in many occasions, tried to express the content of the

national project in the ministry's walls. The chapter analysed these radical ideas of national transformation by exploring how they were specifically articulated through ideas about national population, geopolitical dimension, and a renovation of the urban/rural relationship.

First, the national population was particularly conceived in racial terms which was especially materialised through the architectural shapes. The adoption of multiple architectural styles in the building intended to indicate the social and historical mixture that made Mexico's national population. The use of neo-colonial style symbolised a positive recuperation of past which, at the same time, also signified a reassuring message for the wealthy classes that were frightened by the revolution's radical socio-economic claims. Moreover, the adoption of neo-classical style in the façade was part of this symbolical orientation towards the past, in this case also European past, that participated in the syncretic narrative that defined the project of renovation of the Palace. The representation of the colonial past was coupled with the recuperation of the pre-colonial past articulated in Rivera's artistic language which, in Vasconcelos' terms, symbolised the socio-historical multiplicity characterising Mexico's population. The whole architectural organisation of the Palace had to reflect what Vasconcelos conceives as the Cosmic Race, which is an idea of national population moulded upon racial elements. Contrary to usual postcolonial narrations that used racial narratives in relation to show the proximity to European 'whiteness' - as we have seen in the previous chapter and in the case of Buenos Aires at the turn of the twentieth century - Vasconcelos' use of race aimed to overturn the colonial hierarchies and give a sort of scientific dignity to Mexican population.

Second, and closely related to the racial question, the discourse narrated through Palace's courtyard reorganised the geopolitical role of post-revolutionary Mexico. The statues representing Greece, Spain, the

Aztec, and Buddha aimed to show the how Mexico's origins contained the most prestigious world culture and, on the other, the consequent international prestige that this fact implicated. Such a geopolitical dimension was also narrated through Vasconcelos' adoption of the myth of Atlantis as a native land of Americans. In this sense, Vasconcelos' reinvention of world history implicated a rearticulation of world geography which intended to consign to Mexico, and explicitly to all Latin America, a prominent and independent role within the world scene. Vasconcelos' geopolitical operation had the primary goal to defend Mexico and Latin America from the United States' imperial threat. This project resulted in an echo of the Latin Americanist perspectives formulated by figures of critical importance such as Simón Bolívar and José Martí.

Third, the urban/rural relationship was reorganised and the rural occupied an important role originated from the struggle that defined the revolution. The Palace of Public Education expressed this centrality of the rural through Diego Rivera's murals in its interior. The rural dimension of the country was heroically depicted by the painter who put at the core of the national identity subjects historically emarginated such as the peasantry and the indigenous population. Regardless of the effective participation of these social groups in post-revolutionary politics, Rivera's work contributed to bring countryside's life and struggle to the core of the national power, namely to the capital city.

The first two decades after the revolution represented a period in which the revolutionary values and dreams were strongly symbolised within the state discourse. However, in the 1940s, this project started being clearly in crisis. The population growth coupled with a slackening in the governments' policies in support of countryside, among other factors transformed significantly the post-revolutionary situation. This triggered a radical transformation of Mexico City. Starting from 1960, it was completely clear

“the dissolution of creative energy of the revolution’s project” (Méndez Sáinz 2002: 12), as well as that idea of balance between the rural and the urban life, given the overwhelming power exerted by the latter, and especially by Mexico City. The next chapter will focus precisely on these questions regarding the rationalist idea of the city expressed by modernism, according to which certain shapes of the urban environment were deemed to be as the solution for a society profoundly urbanised. By investigating the conception of Brasília, I will explore the response to the ‘urban enigma’ that, starting in the 1950s with the formidable social transformation marked by the significant growth of population and urbanisation, became a permanent and problematic question throughout Latin America.

## CHAPTER 6. Brasília, a Futuristic Dream: Three Powers Plaza and the Modernist Democracy (1956-1964)

### *Introduction*

The ambitious plan of moving a capital city by building a whole urban settlement in the middle of the country makes Brasília a sort of paramount inevitable case to explore when looking at Latin American postcolonial urbanisation. As I have illustrated in the previous chapter, profound transformations occurred in Mexico in the 1950s such as the dramatic population growth and the spread of huge urban settlements. This transition - which was represented also through the adoption of new ideas and techniques concerning city planning and architecture - consisted in a move towards the 'rationality' of functionalist shapes. If Mexico City represented one of the important examples in that direction in 1940s<sup>95</sup>, this tendency reached its apogee in the late 1950 through the radical project of Brasília.

Several factors made Brasília a unique episode in that period<sup>96</sup>. The uncritical embrace of a modernist planning is one of the most recognisable markers that characterise the making of the new capital city. In line with the project of transforming the country and its society, "Brasília's international style architecture was designed to defamiliarize in order to provoke new forms of social interaction and new ways of looking" (Beal 2010: 2). A new future was proposed for the nation, a future made of progress and

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<sup>95</sup> This of course does not mean to say that there was not modernism in Brazil during that period (for an account of modernist architecture in Brazil see, for example, Forty and Andreoli 2004).

<sup>96</sup> A rich overview of the many studies about Brasília is offered by Williams (2007).



development. *Novelty* was one of the crucial points around which the radical change had to be achieved (Beal 2010; Wright and Turkienicz 1988). The strong interest in shaping a unique built environment made Brasília's silhouette famous all around the world.

The chapter will explore these questions and will discuss the multiple and contradictory geographies in which Brasília was inserted. After introducing the important questions that generated the desire of building a new capital city in the geographical centre of the country, the project of Brasília will be discussed by using three key themes. First, the chapter will analyse the question of national population and how the construction of Brasília aimed to reconfigure the Brazil's geography of population. Second, the urban/rural relationship will be explored through the concepts that defined the modernist ideation of the city; by looking at the core ideas that shaped Brasília's Pilot Plan, the chapter will discuss the faith in the urban as infallible modernising strategy. Third, the chapter will discuss the architectural conceptions of Three Power Plaza and National Congress and will analyse the geopolitical aspirations that strongly marked the discourse of Brasília.

The originality of Brasília did not only consist in the intention to adopt monumentality to show the national power; rather, the combination of other elements made it an intriguing and somehow unique urban experience. For example, architecture was used not just as a marker of the national power, but as a *technology* capable of determining the quality of the social relations. In addition to discipline the 'uncontrolled' spread of impoverished peripheries in Brazilian cities, the project was actualised in order to reduce the urban social inequality through spatial organisation. Equality was an important goal to reach for the leftist government led by Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961). Despite the fact that the project of Brasília failed very soon, as Holston convincingly demonstrated (Holston 1989), this

utopian enterprise is still able to capture a strong attention while reflecting upon the multiple ways in which the *urban enigma* was configured in postcolonial Latin America, during a period in which society was transforming very rapidly and often traumatically (see chapter 2).

While the planners envisioned a city able to change the traditional social relations in Brazil, the built environment remained the only protagonist: in Brasília, “what is generally background – buildings – becomes foreground, which is in part what is so startling about the planned city; it is still known more for its buildings than for its residents” (Beal 2010: 2; a discussion about Brasília through visuals is provided by Frampton and Titan Jr. [2010]). The foreground of Brasília, at the time of its conception, was made of an indomitable desire to place Brazil on the road of ‘development’ (Caldeira and Holston 2005). Conceived as a combination of economic and political elements, the Euro-American bloc formulated the recipe of development within the new global geo-political scene generated in the aftermath of World War II. That formula was suggested as a ‘catching-up’ solution to what started to be labelled as the ‘Third World’ as a result of the process of decolonisation occurred at that time, to which other former colonial areas such as Latin America were added. The project of Brasília was assembled within this global postcolonial *discourse* (Escobar 1995). After exploring the transformations occurred in Buenos Aires and Mexico City in the precious chapters, the story of Brasília is able to say something very similar. Although its project was framed within a different historical and political context, the illusion that laid on the ground of its conception was soon abruptly beheaded. The project of a new capital city highlighted the national response to a regional and international situation that was rapidly changing and bringing, in Brazil as well as in Latin America, new and complex challenges.

## *The Regional Question*

Since the achievement of independence Brazilian geography has been seen as a relevant problem. Not only the huge size of the country, one third of which constituted of the Amazon forest, corresponded to a population which was substantially little and predominantly settled along its coasts, even the various regions of the country presented notable differences and suffered from very little integration. These differences were certainly expressed economically and they were likewise evident in social and cultural terms. As a result of its colonial history, the main cities were situated on the Atlantic shores and they administered the surrounding space to different degrees depending on the case (Morse 1974; Santos 1993). Being shaped and organised in order to fulfil the commercial desires of the empires (see chapter 2), the communication between the internal areas remained for centuries very limited, and the arrival of independence (1822) did not signify a significant change in this direction (change that would not occur up until halfway through the twentieth century. In order to give solution to these issues, the idea of moving the capital city to the interior of the country was already present in the end of the eighteenth century, being iconically included in the republican constitution since 1889<sup>97</sup>.

In more general terms, shifts in the national and international scene determined deep transformations within Brazil's internal areas and a consequent change in the configuration of its socio-economical

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<sup>97</sup> The idea of moving the capital started to circulate already in 1822, as it is witnesses by the patriarch José Bonifácio's Memoir on the Necessity and Means of Building a New Capital in the Interior of Brazil: the idea persisted until when the 1889's first Republican Constitution "granted a reservation of 14,400 square meters for the future Federal District" (Holford 1962: 15; see also Corbisier 1960). In addition, a popular story says that a Salesian priest, Dom Bosco, dreamt Brasília - in a form of a rich civilisation expanding from the geographical centre of the country - in a night in 1833. According to this account, the dream - in which were also given the precise coordinates of the city's location - was a *prophecy* of the birth of Brasília.

geographies. This largely depended, as well as in many Latin American former colonies, on what was each region's specialisation in the production within primary sector. For example, the North-East region suffered from the moving of the coffee production resulted by the abolition of slavery (1888) and the consequent shortage of labour in a territory poorly populated. This activity was encountered space in the southern regions which managed to create the appropriate conditions thanks to national policies attracting a significant number of European migrants in those areas. Another example, and more recent, is that of sugar cane.

These significant changes obviously affected the movement of population and determined a specific configuration of Brazilian social and urban geographies. As well as in the case of Argentina (see chapter 5), the huge size of the country coupled with a small population generated the idea that the best way of developing a modern and efficient country was that of populating it (Balan 1973), and the favourite strategy was that of bringing European population. The goals of this project were, among others, to achieve a more homogeneous density of inhabitants throughout the country, to challenge the shortage of labour in the coffee industry, and to strengthen the control of the borders (Balan 1973: 9). A massive arrival of European migrants characterised the 1885 – 1930 period (references). The large majority of them - mainly formed by Italians - settled in Sao Paulo, in order to be employed within the coffee production now moved to the south of the country. However, in socio-economic terms, the biggest transformation started in the 1930s.

1930 represented the year in which the important political figure in Brazil's twentieth century, Getúlio Vargas, began his 15-year period of ruling (transforming into a dictator from 1937 to 1945), which would be followed by other four years of presidency (democratically elected) from 1951 to 1954, when he abruptly ended his political and biological life by

committing suicide. If until then Brazil's economy was overwhelmingly defined as a primary sector exporter, in the 1930s a strong process of industrialisation, coupled with other internal changes, began to transform the configuration of the country (De Farias 2010). As a result of the 1929 international crisis and the consequent fall of the coffee industry, Vargas enhanced strong policies in favour of import substitution in order to give Brazil more solidity and autonomy with respect to the international markets. This project involved a process of industrialisation that came to generate a situation of "urban macrocephaly" [*macrocefalia urbana*] expressed by Sao Paulo and its surrounding areas, where most of the industrial activities were established (Matos 2012: 13). As the term suggestively denotes, the state of Sao Paulo concentrated a massive extension of urbanised zones that indicated the profound unbalance in terms of distribution of population, resources and activities within the national space.

This mutation provoked intense internal migration movements in two directions: from rural to urban spaces and from many areas of the country towards, mostly, the industrialising South East. The migratory movements influenced the urban processes, especially in terms of concentration of population, in an opposite way than that intended by the new policies. Looking at J.R.B. Lopes' reading of 1950 census, at that time Brazil's urbanisation was essentially concentrated in three big areas: the south-east, the "dynamic centre" [*centro dinâmico*] of the country, counting 229 cities and encompassing the states of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Minas Gerais' southern part; the south-west, having just half of the number of cities, 65 extending along Santa Catarina's and Paraná's oriental sides; the south-east, 76 cities laying from the state of Paraíba until Ilheus, situated in Bahia's south. These urban areas stood for the 14% of the national territory (Lopes 1968: 68-69) in which in 1950 lived 33.444.949 people, more than half of Brazil's 51.944.397 inhabitants at that time. Moreover, in the

period starting from 1920, Brazil's overall population started to grow dramatically: it increased from 27.500.000 in 1920 to 41.252.944 in 1940, reaching 70.191.000 in 1960. This formidable growth was in accordance to, and to some extent it anticipated, the urban explosion marking Latin America from 1950s (see chapter 2).

Like in Argentina and Mexico, the increase in population was coupled with a dramatic rise of urban inhabitants - as a result of the combination of population growth and internal migration. For example, in mere quantitative terms, if the urban population was the 10,7% of Brazil's inhabitants in 1920, it would rise to 31,24% in 1940 and to 54,08% in 1960 (Oliven 2010 [1980]: 67). This process was clearly part of what Quijano (1975) defined as "the urbanization of Latin American society" and brought big changes to Brazil's socio-economic, cultural and, ultimately, spatial structure. To it put shortly, what characterised the most the largest urban centres was the marginalisation of wide sectors of the poor population, that flowed towards the cities, especially, but. not exclusively, in the southern areas, in the hope of finding better opportunities. In spite of these drastic changes, the configuration of Brazil remained substantially divided into several regions marked by little connection among them. Each region was specialised in particular activities and a combination of economic (such as the concentration of industry in the south-east), natural (difficulty of moving easily between the regions) and material (infrastructure) factors contributed to maintain Brazilian space very poorly integrated.

This fragmentation contributed to create the "regional question" [*questão regional*] in Brazil (for example, Cano 1985), that is the certainly that these entrenched spatial asymmetries prevented the country from the possibility of undertaking a balanced and consistent development. The problem was evident in terms of distribution of population, industrial activities and, in relation to that, important and efficient urban centres. For

example, the first period of industrialisation, going from 1933 to 1955, has been named as “restricted industrialisation” [*industrialização restringida*] in order to stress the lack of an industrial diversified offer and, in addition to the still prominence of the primary sector exportations, the absence of a fully autonomous national industrialisation (Furtado 1969; Mello 1982; Cano 1985).

In brief, Brazil’s geographical configuration since 1930 was defined by a process of centralisation and concentration of economic and political power around the state and the city, of Sao Paulo. This fact can be understood as *internal colonialism* (sometimes labelled as Sao Paulo’s imperialism [*imperialismo paulista*])<sup>98</sup> in order to highlight the south-eastern territory’s hegemonic role over the whole of national space. This interpretation was in line with Dependency theorists’ centre/periphery approach (see chapter 2), and was put forward by particular emphasis by Furtado (1964), who framed the regional question within the national articulation of power. In the decades following World War II the state made a significant effort in order to change this condition of fragmentation and unbalance. Investments in infrastructure become the priority, during that period of time, new and solid roads connected the regional system of communication that were substantially isolated thus far; in general terms, the fluidification of the transport system was thought of as a strategic way to enact an effective import substitution process (Santos 1993: 36). In addition, in the early 1950s, the state created new institutions<sup>99</sup> and implemented policies, such as the possibility of fiscal incentives, in order to

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<sup>98</sup> The term is criticised, for example, by Cano 1985: 32-44.

<sup>99</sup> These institutions had the role of monitoring and advancing plans in the singular regions: for example, it was created SPVEA (1953) for Amazonian region, SPVERFSP (1956) for the south-eastern frontiers, GTDN (1958) for the north-east (probably the most important strategically – as it aimed to create a strong industrial activity in the area – and led by Furtado himself) CODECO (1961) for centre-east.

stimulate investments in regions other than the south-east, and especially in favour of the north-east (Cano 1985 :24-25).

Thus, in the mid-1950s Brazil was as a country that was pushing towards a process of modernisation predominantly expressed through a strong effort to enhance industrialisation; at the same time, it was striving to achieving a more equal distribution of the activities, in social, political, and economic terms on a national level. The solution of these issues, that is to say, the solution of what conceived as the *regional question* (Cano 1985), constituted a key-element that would have led the country to the track of development. Within this context, Brazil assisted at the arrival of Juscelino Kubitschek presidency in 1956, a five-year period that would represent a landmark in Brazil's history of twentieth century. The leftist president stepped into the regional question with a project that would strongly characterise his period in office: the construction of a new capital city placed in the geographical centre of the country. In such way, the country would not only be managed more efficiently and effectively, but it would also experience a renovation of national identity that would shape a new, modern, and unifying image of its successful future.

### *A New Geography of Population*

This section will explore how the construction of Brasília aimed to expand the control of the state over the whole of national space. By particularly analysing Kubitschek's reflections upon the elements that justified the project of a new capital city, the section highlights the spatial approach that, according to a determinist approach, should have enabled the actual modernisation of Brazil. More specifically, by stressing the resemblances with colonial discourses such as labelling the territory as 'immature' or



‘empty’, the discussion will focus on how the idea of having a better distribution of the *national population* was deemed to be crucial for an actual achievement of that modern state. In doing so, the section will further stress how spatial elements - also in terms of geography of population - were the elements that would determine of the success of the new capital city<sup>100</sup>.

The project of Brasília was immediately part of the Kubitschek agenda. Strongly promoted during the presidency campaign in 1955, the works started in late 1956, and the new capital city was finally inaugurated less than four year later, on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1960. The planning was designed on the basis of modernist conceptions: the city’s shapes were the result of the winning project of the contest promoted by the government for the realisation of the new city, project which was created the urban planner Lucio Costa and the architect Oscar Niemeyer. Brazilian urbanisation was largely concentrated along the coast, and this was a feature in common in most of Latin America, where the European colonisation normally consisted in founding or controlling cities along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts to establish outposts easy to defend and strategical for commercial reasons (see chapter 2). For centuries, many internal zones of Latin American territories were largely unexplored by the European conquerors; in addition, in those areas the indigenous resistance was much more efficient. In any case, the idea of the westward *frontier* was something that famously shaped the colonial imagination throughout the eastern costs of the Americas<sup>101</sup>.

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<sup>100</sup> For example, within the magazine Brasília, founded to follow and analyse the construction of the new capital city, it was noted that “since forever our fundamental problem has been that of territorial unity, being Brazil today the bigger fatherland [pátria] of the world without homogeneity in relation to housing, and being inhabited by a people without any linguistic nor religious differences” (Rodrigues Machado 1958: 1).

<sup>101</sup> As the colonisers arrived through the Atlantic much of the exploration/conquest was carried out towards the West. In the United States this had a particularly strong influence on the imagination of internal frontiers.

The idea of Brasília, however in its a specific and more recent context, was conceived in line with this imaginary; Kubitschek highlighted that “the new Capital [...] made it possible that two thirds of our territory – which used to be discouraging ‘empty spaces’ – were conquered” (Kubitschek 2000 [1975]: 11, inverted commas in the original text). In another occasion he declared that Brasília was “the first permanent mark of the conquest of the West” (Kubitschek 1957: 1). There was still a sort of conflicting perception about the interior territories, as something that, although it was no longer disputed with the indigenous communities it was nonetheless imagined with hostility. After all, the negativity associated with vastity and emptiness obsessed the ruling elites of large Latin American countries, such as Argentina and Mexico (for a comparative study, see Balan 1973). In this sense, Kubitschek clearly stated that “Brasília is the product of this politics of occupation of fatherland [*Pátria*] in the limits of its vastness” (Kubitschek 1958b: 6). The politician and philosopher Roland Corbisier shared a similar view in the pages of the architectural magazine *Módulo*, where he noted that the project of Brasília was strictly tied with the necessity of considering the “theme of development as a process of economic and cultural integration of the country and, eventually, Brasília will have the function of enhancing the process of national development” (Corbisier 1960: 4). Such a strategy, which was at the core of the project of Brasília, was in line with the ideology of the modern geography<sup>102</sup>. This latter was strongly manifested in the “standard of the spatial relationships: all the points are directed towards a unique centre” (Farinelli 2003: 15) (fig. 10). More specifically, looking at how territory was represented in Western history, a radical change occurred at the end of the Middle Age when, in order to achieve that rationality and efficiency of space, sinuous lines were radically eliminated from the map. As Farinelli noted, “the syntax of the modern territory will be principally

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<sup>102</sup> For instance, the new capital city has been understood also as *a question of scale* (Gorovitz 1985).

Figure 1 - Brasília , the new capital on the map. Source: *Brasília*, n.8, August 1957:17



constituted by rectilinearity [...]. It is a model extremely pervasive: with its unicity, it is able to perceive, represent and build the face of the earth, and in so doing it colonises all the forms of the relationship to the earth itself" (Farinelli 2003: 14-15). Within an article appeared in the journal *Brasília* it was forcefully summarised: "geography at the command of peoples constituted the biggest factor of the great march of civilisation" (Trindade 1958: 1). The Argentine architect and urban planner Amancio Williams reinforced this association between Brasília and progress:

“Brasília represents a rare and exceptional endeavour to apply to twentieth century society what man has discovered and invented in recent times, and that application, which is eminently practical, can bring nothing but favourable consequences to Humanity, enabling men to live better, surrounded by beauty, and then with greater probabilities of peace and harmony” (Williams 1959: 3).

On these lines, but by adopting a developmentalist perspective shaped by biological examples, Kubitschek emphasised that “Brazil turned into adult after the construction of Brasília. During all its history – from the Discovery until my Government – we lived, to use an observation made by our first historian Frei Vicente do Salvador<sup>103</sup>, ‘scratching the sand of the beaches like crabs’” (2000 [1875]: 11). These few words contained some core aspects of Kubitschek’s (post)colonial imagination. The president showed the linear understanding of national history which he explained as a process going from the immaturity of childhood to the fulfilment of *adult life*. And, probably highlighting that difficult shift, he stressed that Brasília was “our biggest collective effort” (Kubitschek 1962: 95). Like suspended in an indefinite “not yet” (in the sense of Chakrabarty 2000: 8, see chapter 1), the country was waiting for a triggering event that would have brought it into the condition of maturity. The *urban*, and specifically the construction of a new and geographically central capital city made possible for Brazil to act that fundamental passage. In such way, urban planning assumed a dramatic and decisive importance not only in terms of the physical expression of the city - as we will see later - but also, and more importantly, in terms of placing the city in a strategical location on the national map. Moreover, there was the intention to not replicate the fact of losing the control over the growth of the city, issue that was progressively characterising

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<sup>103</sup> Vicente do Salvador (1564 – c. 1635) wrote *History of Brazil* in 1627.

urbanised areas in many regions of the world. As Niemeyer highlighted while speaking of Brasília's urban areas "we fixed the volumes, the free spaces, the [buildings'] heights [...], with the goal of preventing the city's growth, a growth similar to that of modern cities which is marked by disharmony and confusion" (Niemeyer 1961: 46). This crucial importance of the urban landscape for a country's wealth and development undoubtedly constitutes one of the apogees of the "urban ideology" that Castells described as a twentieth century's global feature (Castells 1977: 73-74). Moreover, thinking about the history of Brazil as something that began with the *discovery* of the Americas meant the erasure of the time previous to the conquest. The president quoted the famous historian in order to highlight how Brazilians, that seem here to be synonym of European colonisers, did not manage to live in other places but the coasts up until the arrival of his government.

The strategical importance of Brasília was therefore to *conquer* the interior of the country. Kubitschek, fourteen years after the inauguration of Brasília, reformulated the reasoning that, framed in a strong territorial and determinist logic, 'inevitably' led to the new capital city. However, this strong preoccupation over the interior was not an exclusive condition of Brazil at that time, on the contrary, the construction of the Brazilian capital was the "point of arrival" of a spread attempt to rearticulate national geographies throughout all Latin America (Gorelik 2013: 373). In particular, there had been a "long 'march towards the West', as attempt to unify the coast and the arid interior [*sertão*] in order to construct a modern and integrated nationality" that constituted "one of the most ambitious objectives for the developmentalist thought", trend which "commanded the nascent urban planning across the continent in the 1950s" (Gorelik 2013: 373).

Within such a scene, the developmentalist narrative that prepared the birth of Brasília actualized a project that was extreme in many senses. During the campaign for the presidency, Kubitschek had no doubt that a new capital city was what the country needed at that historical moment. He wrote in 1962: “I always knew what I wanted. I always knew how to get it. And this explains Brasília” (Kubitschek 1962: 1964). When the city was built, he remarked that questions regarding “civilisation”, population density and demography were already in place before his arrival: “all these *symptoms of progress* already existed and they were occurring along the extended littoral strip, whose profundity did not exceed a band of two hundred kilometres”; overall, “the population was scarce – at least shortly before the beginning of my government – barely surpassing the index of 6 inhabitants per square kilometre. Equipped with fabulous wealth but essentially *virgin* of human labour” (Kubitschek 2000 [1975]: 12, emphasis added). In this way, on the one hand the traditional language of colonialism was adopted on a national scale; on the other, it emerged that the geography inherited from European colonisation was incapable to satisfy the national needs. The president specified that

“Brazil, orientated towards the sea until then, had to assume an aptitude that was diametrically inverse, that is, giving the back to the Ocean and striving to take possession of its territory, the existence of which was known only through maps. However, in order to fully achieve this goal, there is a need for a *revolution*. Not in the sense of blood, but in the administrative methods” (Kubitschek 2000 [1975]: 13, emphasis added).

First of all, Kubitschek stated that the country had to “extinguish the empty spaces” and solve economic and social “taboos” through, among other things, an “uniform dissemination of progress”, and the construction of roads going to “all the directions” (Kubitschek 2000 [1975]: 13). Among the

many objectives that he explained, there was the necessity of moving the place where all these decisions were made, necessity that Kubitschek satisfied by “building the new capital in the geographical centre of the country” (Kubitschek 2000 [1975]: 13). Here again, the distribution of people and the exploitation of the territory itself are thought of as necessary stages towards the national progress. This idea was strongly advanced by Corbisier as well, who discussed in the columns of *Módulo* the radicality of Brasília as a “revolutionary gesture” (Corbisier 1960: 3) that was addressing historical problems such as the issues inherited from the colonial past, therefore being able to take the whole of Brazil to the road of development. The city was used as a technical device which was able to bring the country to prosperity, a device whose potentiality had to be fully deployed as “all the greatest cultures and civilizations that we are aware of [...] have reached their apogee with the construction of a great city, a great capital city (Corbisier 1960: 7). As a result, “we celebrate the privilege of being the people of Brasília’s epoch, [which is] the flower of the desert, the capital of future and hope” (Corbisier 1960: 9). As soon as the new capital city was built, Kubitschek noted: “Brasília is there - and it is a work [*uma obra*] adequate to the greatness of the world we are building for our children (Kubitschek 1962: 110).

Looking at the president’s reasoning, we are going to keep the attention for a little more to how his (and his staff) adoption of the most prominent principles which characterised (Western) modern geography. As mentioned in chapter 1, during colonial time mapping was a fundamental way not only to represent the European domains but also to shape and organise those very territories, thus exercising a *creative role* rather than being merely descriptive (Wood 1992; Farinelli 2009). In this way, the geometrical equilibrium drawn on the map was deemed to be automatically translated into an effective functionality in the reality, and not least in terms of a precise configuration of population across the national space, therefore

organising the country depending on its partial and substantially irrational representation of its map.

It is important to note that Brazil did not represent a special episode as long as the modern/European 'rationality' was the dominant framework used to think and 'develop' Latin American country since the achievement of independence (Mignolo 2000). However, the project of Brasília was a sort of extreme application of that rational ideology that was articulated through the authoritarian abstraction of the map. This authoritarian geometry was the leading principle of the spatial collocation of city and national population in the national map. As we are going to see, Brasília's Pilot Plan presented by the architect Lucio Costa excellently materialised these concepts on the urban scale, confirming the absolute faith in the modernist sharp lines.

### *The Dominance of the Urban: Modernist Rules*

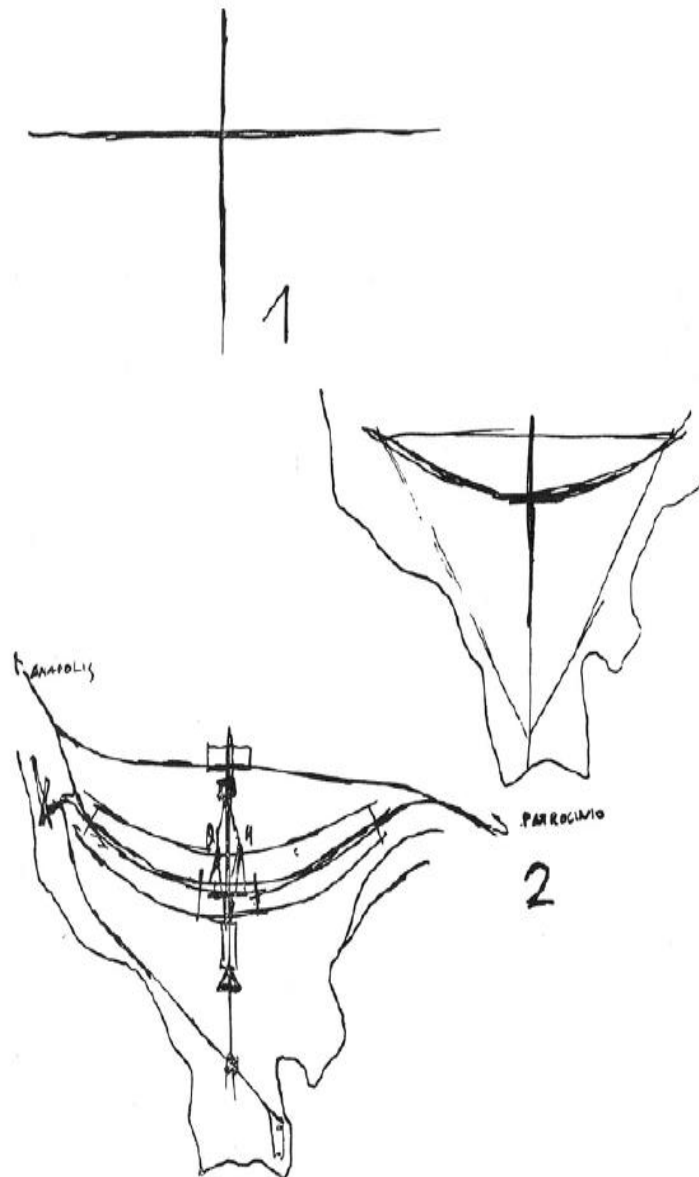
If the fact of constructing the new capital city in the geographical centre of the country had the goal to even Brazil's national geography, the design of Brasília was equally deemed to be able to radically reduce the strong social inequality that defined Brazilian cities. By exploring the modernist shapes upon which Brasília was built, this section will explore how the *urban/rural relationship* was resolved through an unlimited reliance on the urban, which was believed to be the leading actor in the project of radical modernisation of the country.

Lucio Costa's Pilot Plan is one of the most famous and used documents for the study of Brasília; this is a succinct text that explains the ambitious and at the same time simple planning for the new city. The description of the project is accompanied by a few hand drawings through



which Costa show the visual genealogy of the future city's plan. The modernist conception was well expressed in the first drawing (fig. 11). Two crossed straight lines that, according to a radical interpretation of the modern perspective, established the geometrical and philosophical heart of the new capital city (fig. 12). Initially recalling the shapes of colonial planning, namely the crossed lines that characterised the grid plan (see chapter 2), Costa's project had a similar and determinist conception of space. As the architectural magazine *Módulo* stated in an editorial article in 1959, "one of the main problems of city planners today is related to the architectural unity which is *invariably* a source of beauty in the ancient cities of Europe" (*Módulo* 1959: 3 emphasis added). The project of Brasília attempted to break this invariable tradition by means of its radical shapes. The magazine concluded the reflection by that, eventually, "it might be that Brasília will exercise a salutary influence on Brazilian architecture in the field of city planning, by disciplining the use of masses and open spaces by restoring among the architects the concern with unity (*Módulo* 1959: 4). Brasília's Pilot Plan has been widely discussed (important contributions from a critical point of view are those by Holston 1989 and Scott 1998), however, in spite of the strong and insightful criticisms that these studies have highlighted – analysing both Brasília and modernist architecture as a whole – perhaps not enough attention has been paid to the similarities between this project(s) and the main conceptions describing the planning of colonial cities (see chapter 2), in the terms of both physical shapes and some of its theoretical conceptions. Although there were different goals than those of colonial cities – such as the control and discipline of indigenous population or the organisation the empire's commercial activity, the strictly functionalist approach likewise marked the

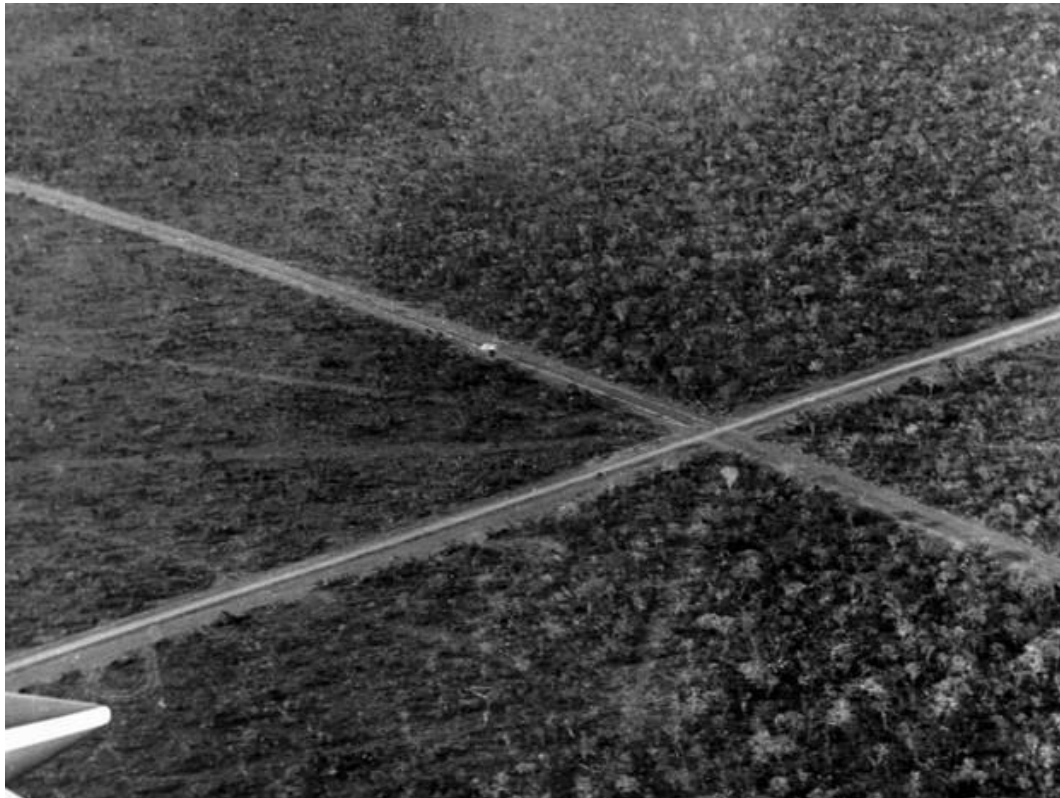
*Figure 4 - Costa's drawings in Pilot Plan. Source: Costa 1991 [1957]*



plan of Brasília. Particularly, the new Brazilian capital was similar to colonial cities in the sense that the former, using in King's words, were

conceived as an efficient and sophisticated “social technologies” (King 1990: 9). In addition to the national reasons discussed above, there was the belief that the modernist plan would have been able to overcome the ‘traditional’ social inequality that was characterising Brazil.

Figure 7 - Monumental Axes. Source: *Globo.com* 16/06/2015 (Picture: Mário Fontenelle, 1957)



The plan aimed to reorganise Brazil’s social relations via its modernist radicality. It is interesting to note how the spatial organisation of the city map, in resemblance with a modern and colonial approach, constituted the basis for a materiality that was deemed to transform the city’s, and as a metonym the nation’s, social fabric. As if inequality were a mere reflex of the physical environment, the shape of the city would transform more than four centuries of social history, included the burden of colonialism. When Kubitschek referred to the impressions that Brasília made to foreign personalities, he enthusiastically pointed out the words

pronounced by the French André Malraux. The visitor, important novelist and French Minister of Cultural Affairs at that moment, asked: “how did you manage to build this city within a full democratic regime, Mr. President? Works such as Brasília are possible only under a dictatorship” (Kubitschek 2000 [1975]: 467). Malraux’s question is of extreme interest for at least two reasons. Firstly, although the question was asked by using a positive tone – and probably referred to the size and diversity of resources put at work simultaneously – it somehow indicates the authoritarianism distinguishing its planning. The spectacle of the monumental event, the relative simplicity of its shapes, and the absolute prominent position in the national scene, could interestingly remind more about absolutist projects than signs of progressive policies. Secondly, a military dictatorship in 1964 would actually be what ended, among many other things, the project of social equality that was at the core of the conception of Brasília and characterised, as we will see later in the chapter, the city’s connected ideas of democracy and development.

According to the president, Lucio Costa well understood how Brasília should have been. Costa’s

“ideas coincided, precisely, to what I felt in relation to the problem. Brasília could not be and did not have to be any city, the same or similar to many other cities existing in the world. Having to constitute the basis for the irradiation of a pioneering system [*sistema desbravador*] that would have brought an unrevealed universe to civilisation, it had to be, forcibly, a metropolis with different characters, a metropolis ignoring contemporary reality and turning, with all its constitutive elements, towards the future. This was, undoubtedly, the reasoning that oriented my actions and determined its construction” (Kubitschek 2000 [1975]: 71-72).

Thus, in a first place, Brasília had to be *the* city, in the sense of a powerful technology (see discussion in chapter 2) that would be able to transform the surrounding space, something that *irradiates* its civilising force, recalling the geometrical conception, throughout the national space. And, even more importantly, that idea of novelty was deemed to be indispensable for the production of a shining future. Focusing again on a view from outside Brazil, the British architectural writer James Maude Richards commented in the columns of *Módulo*:

“To the European visitor Brasília is something quite out of the ordinary [...]. Everywhere in Europe city-planning projects far smaller and simpler than Brasília are so hampered by local restrictions, legal and administrative, conflicting interests of landholders, [...]. This fast, confident execution of an idea is something we, in the Old World, are not accustomed to. The European visitor touring the site of the *future city* finds he readily catches the enthusiasm that is shown there” (Richards 1959: 5; emphasis added)

It is interesting to see how both the president and the specialised press remarked how foreign visitors remained astonished by the view of the new capital city, fact that stressed the ability to build something that in Europe was thought to be achieved only with a dictatorship or that was even impossible to be done due to structural issues. Thanks to spatial elements such as its location, planning, and architecture, the new capital city was projected in order to lead the country towards the future, making use of a temporality that would not have referred to the past - either colonial or postcolonial (and even less, as we saw through the words of the president, pre-colonial) - nor the present, that was seen just as a necessary moment of transformation. In other words, as stressed by Edward Cornish, Brasília was a matter of

*building utopia* (Cornish 1991; in relation to Brasília and the idea of utopia, see also Stierli 2013). The utopic aspiration seems to be clearly present in the words of Niemeyer; while describing the years when Brasília was projected, he said:

“my preoccupation was to find - without functionalist limitations - a clear and beautiful form that could define and characterised the main buildings - the actual Palaces - within a necessary criterion of simplicity and nobility. My main concern was that these constructions were something new and different from the melancholy of traditional architecture, so that the future visitors of the New Capital would be hit by a sensation of surprise and emotion, sensation that would therefore characterise the city’s greatness” (Niemeyer 1961: 14).

This strong idea of modern greatness alongside the idea of a sudden surprise when seeing the overseas city recalls the modern discourse. Although the conquest of the Americas had happened more than four centuries earlier, that idea of modernity that began with it (see chapter 1) seemed to be still in place when Brasília was conceived. More specifically, as Quijano and Wallerstein noted while describing the realisation of the modern world,

“the deification and reification of newness, itself as a derivative of the faith in science which is a pillar of modernity. The New World was new, that is not old, not tied down to tradition, to a feudal past, to privilege, to antiquated ways of doing things. Whatever was ‘new’ and more ‘modern’ was better. But more than that, everything was always defined as being new. Since the value of historic depth was denied morally, its use as an analytical tool was dismissed as well” (Quijano and Wallerstein: 1992: 551-552).

These concepts, which had been rearticulated to each other in the urban enterprise of the new capital city, illustrate quite clearly the ideas underlying the radicality of the modernist plan. Stressing the strong approval that the plan of Brasília had in the international scene, Módulo reported the word of the British architect William Holford, he stated: “I still think that in Europe, in Australia or in America, as well as in Brazil, Lucio Costa’s Pilot Plan of Brasília represents one of the most important documents of our epoch” (Holford 1960 :2). It is therefore perfectly clear what Kubitschek meant (and aimed) when, using an epical language, portrayed Brasília as a “mission” (Kubitschek 2000 [1975]: 465). Looking at this argument on the scale of the Americas, since the post-independence period,

“as North America diverged from Latin America, its advantage was described by most persons to the fact that it better incarnated ‘newness’, that it was more ‘modern’. Modernity became the justification for economic success, but also its proof. [...] Under the appearance of offering a way out of the inequalities of the present, the concept of ‘newness’ encrusted them and inserted their inevitability into the collective superego of the world-system” (Quijano and Wallerstein: 1992: 552).

Modernity had also material results that visibly marked the postcolonial space. The built environment is a prominent example in this sense, as an “instrument of modernity”: cities, roads, buildings, monuments produced the “modern nations” on the basis of a “language of summation” capable of “bringing to a close what can be remembered and what can be said about what the nation is” (Simone 2012: 205). Brasília’s plan evidently materialised the combination of modernity and novelty.

Costa’s adoption of large residential blocs, called *superquadras* (superblocks), was one of the peculiar features making the distinctive shape

of the city (El-Dahdah 2005). This choice was mainly due to two reasons. Firstly, as explained by Costa himself in an interview, there was the necessity of finding a balance and harmony within the city's design: "these rather large squares could naturally enter in a dialogue with the monumental scale of the administrative areas, and the city would therefore not run the risk of being divided in two" (quoted in Zapatel 2005: 19). *Superquadra's* dimensions were approximately 300 x 300 meters and, in terms of height, the buildings had the limit of six floors. One next to the other like in a chessboard, Brasília counted 120 superblocks in 1960<sup>104</sup> making, on the other hand, a sort of gigantic reproduction of the grid that characterised colonial planning (see chapter 2); in Costa's project, a group of four *superquadra* formed a neighbourhood, that is, a structure in which all the important facilities were present, from places for shopping to school and pharmacies (El-Dahdah 2005). More importantly, the whole spatial organisation was envisaged for encouraging equality and avoiding segregation, with this latter being perceived as a structural problem of Brazil's urban landscape. In addition, Costa noted that he "always suggested that each neighbourhood area [...] should have apartments of two or three different categories to allow, as an ideal city, coexistence in schools, or a normal coexistence of population that belong to different economic strata" (quoted in Zapatel 2005: 22). The physical organisation of the city, therefore, built upon a strongly deterministic approach, should have overcome the traditional inequality that defined the country since the colonial era. Using the succession of superblocks, as "a chain" (Costa in Zapatel 2005: 22), would have created an urban fabric in which segregation was impossible to be found.

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<sup>104</sup> As stressed by Holston, "the superquadra is a specific type of collective dwelling and is unique to the Plano Piloto. Within the Plano, superquadras house approximately 66% of the population and contain approximately 70% of the total number of dwelling units" (Holston 1989: 164).



In a period marked by a dramatic population increase, that in turn enhanced the growth of the big urban settlements and the segregation and exclusion of large sector of the urban population (see chapter 2). The goal of 'containing' the city and avoiding these dystopic transformations was central. As Farinelli noted,

"the whole modern city planning stands [...] on the order based on segregation, that is on the distinction and separation of a certain number of urban ground's elementary uses, to which autonomous and isolated collocations are assigned. As a result, the block, and not the street, it is conceived as a fundamental unit of architecture" (Farinelli 2003: 124-125).

It is precisely the street life that had characterised the Brazilian cities that tried to be overcome through the radical planning of the new capital city (Holston 1989). Brasília was projected to be a *different city*, a city that would be able to avoid the 'social diseases' that were spreading throughout Brazil as well as the whole Latin America. For instance, Williams remarked his enthusiasm about Brasília and stressed the role of the city as a potential watershed in history; he argued that the city "may generate a current that will bring the world to use the know knowledge for the benefit of society; it is a great experiment and a great achievement that may well spark a revolutionary movement" (Williams 1959: 3). As a result, the *urban enigma* was resolved in Brazil by means of a futuristic urbanisation which was realised through the adoption of the modernist philosophy and its ideology of straight lines - which reached in Brasília one of its apogees. The ideology of modernity is something that has gone through the centuries and has been articulated, both in material and cultural terms, in diverse and multifaceted shapes.

Looking at the architecture, modernism seems clearly to have constituted one of these (re)articulations. Modernist architecture has been

deployed both in the former empires and post-colonies as a sort of infallible modernising machine which was deemed to be able to speed up such processes of development/Westernisation of the world peripheries. Just to give a prominent example, India soon after the independence (1947) developed similar plans of modernising the country through a significant expansion of the urban areas and frequently adopting the modernist architectural model, the most extreme example of which was the construction of Chandigarh, the Punjab's new capital city built in 1960 following Le Corbusier's modernist conceptions (for an overview of modernism in postcolonial India see Kalia 2006; for a comparison between Brasília and Chandigarh see Baan, Nooteboom, and Stierli 2010). In addition to that, the greatest modernist projects in Brazil and India shared the belief of being powerful tools in order to reduce the social inequality that characterised the countries, in accordance to a radical determinist vision of the urban environment which will be explored in more details later on. What is crucial to highlight here as a common feature making both the projects is the extreme effort to exert a sharp break with the past in favour of the realisation of a prosperous, and unhistorical, future.

Like Kubitschek said in a New Year's Eve speech in 1956, when the works had just started, Brasília represented

“a renovating act, a political and creating act, and act that, being impelled by the national growth [...], will promote the foundation of a new era for our motherland. [...] We are going to erect a powerful centre of irradiation of life and progress in the heart of our country” (Brasília 1957 [num.1]: 1).

In order to fill the alleged gap with the Western/European world, as a shortcut in the goal of *negotiating* the temporal position (in the sense of Bhabha [2004: 218], see chapter 1) and without showing any concerns about any geo-historical elements, Brasília's modernism aimed to lead Brazil

towards a successful future. The postcolonial anxieties were thus materialised through modernist shapes, relying on the urban an infallible tool to organise a modern nation. An approach that was fully directed towards the future and that disregarded any sort of connection with the past; this also signified a reorganisation of the country's image on the international scale.

### ***Geopolitical Desires: Democracy and Development***

As noted at the beginning of the chapter, the idea of Brasília acted on multiple scales; in addition to having the goal to reorganise the national geographies, the new capital city aspired to bring Brazil to a prominent position within the *geopolitical scene*. This section will specifically analyse this international dimension of Brasília by exploring the projects of Three Powers Plaza and the National Congress. Being the whole project of Brasília defined by the ideas of democracy and development, these architectural forms constituted, both in physical and symbolical terms, the core of this transformation. The section will also discuss how these latter questions were part of larger international debates that were shaped within the geography of the Cold War.

One of the symbolically most important places in the new capital city was *Praça dos Três Poderes* (Three Powers Plaza), a huge triangular plaza having at its vertices the buildings representing the institutions in charge of Brazil's politics: the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary. The three powers, although placed in the same *praça*, were physically located in the three opposite corners, as to stress Brazil's achievement of the separation of power that constituted the basic element of any modern democracy. In Kubitschek's words, democracy was a "clear path" (Kubitschek 1962: 21).

However, before discussing the significance of the buildings in relation to the notions of democracy and development, it is worth considering the ideas that underpinned the conception of the plaza.

The idea of a new and to some extent revolutionary city was tightly coupled with urban conceptions that had to be equally innovative. That idea of newness was posited as necessary to confer a special and unprecedented sense of success to the new capital city. If Brasília, according to a popular story, was born in a priest's dream (see note 97 above), now the dream finally took form in the potent shapes of its modernist architecture<sup>105</sup>. It was something highly original, containing a strong and ambitious spirit of futurism within itself. However, the project was realised also on the basis of a more tangible though controversial objective such as that of national development. The whole of Kubitschek presidency was strongly marked by "the ideology of development" (*ideologia do desenvolvimento*) (Cardoso 1977) and Brasília was only one of the actions, undoubtedly the most striking, within that ideological framework. It is very important, thus, to unpack that idea of development and see how Brasília, and therefore urbanisation, was conceived as a formidable vehicle to achieve it.

In a global perspective, the idea of development refers particularly to the period after World War II, when in the aftermath of decolonisation Western powers indicated the ways in which the former colonies would reach a similar level of wealth and prosperity belonging to the 'First World' (see chapter 2). In particular, it was that the period in which "development thinking broadened to encompass modernization, economic growth was combined with political modernization, that is, nation building, and social modernization such as fostering entrepreneurship and 'achievement orientation'" (Pieterse 2010: 6). In the case of Brasília, it is possible to see

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<sup>105</sup> In this regard Kubitschek noted that, when becoming president "I found the idea, [which was] 167 years old, to move the capital city to the centre of Brazil" (Kubitschek 1962: 57, emphasis added).

how the planning of the city - thinking for example of the reasons for its geographical location - was related to the idea of enhancing the country's economic growth which, accordingly, would correspond to significant leap in the geopolitical chessboard. At the same time, the city's architecture emphasises the intention to show the achievement of an actual political modernisation.

Praça dos Treis Poderes (fig. 13) was part of Lucio Costa's Pilot Plan and was located at the bottom of the Monumental Axes. Given the importance of that space, Costa made explicit reference to the reason of that choice since the first presentation of the plan. Costa stressed that

"it is possible to note the buildings destined to the fundamental powers which, being three and autonomous, find in the equilateral triangle - that is related to the architecture from a more remote antiquity - the elementary form that is more appropriate to contain them. We create then a triangular embarkment with a support of exposed brickwork that, elevated from the surrounding lawn, gives the access to the highway ramp conducting to the residence and the airport. In each corner of that plaza - we could call it Three Powers Plaza - there is one of the buildings, we find those of the Government and Supreme Federal Court in the base and the Congress in the vertex" (Costa 1957: 36).

Geometrical relationships were thought to be able to represent the political situation of the country, and the organisation of distances in a symmetrical way was supposed to produce a sort of faith in the creation of the new Brazil. Once again, the modern and modernist capital city was the perfect *urban device* that, both materially and symbolically, was meant to be the pivot on which should have rotated the whole country. William described the *linearity* of the city's central shapes with these concise words:

“when I arrived in Brasília and saw the governmental zone, I was impressed by the dignity of the open spaces and the harmony of the buildings in relation to one another [...] The Three Powers Plaza is exceptionally pleasing to the eye for the same reason, [that is] the simplicity with which the buildings are located” (Williams 1959: 3).

The position of the plaza indicated another crucial element which was at the core of the *urban enigma* that laid at the core of Brazilian society during that period. Costa explained:

“in my spirit, when I had this intention to trace the position of the Plaza, it was, to some extent, like the objective to accentuate the contrast of the civilized part, the command of the country, with the surrounding rural nature. We intended that the latter came to encounter the triangular support characterising Three Powers Plaza” (Costa quoted in Gorovitz 1985: 39).

While the previous section of the chapter stressed how the urban dominated, especially in the discursive term, the relationship with the rural, this is one of the very few moments in which the rural explicitly appeared in the discourse about Brasília. In any case, the city, in its modernist and futuristic definition, would represent the undisputed *command* over the national space, staging the subaltern position of the rural, namely what Quijano described as its progressive “position of dependency” (1967: 9) (see chapter 2). Once again, the physical expression of the city was designed in order to materialise social aspects, or at least those social elements that would have defined the new country.

Continuing with the description of the plaza and the surrounding areas in the pilot plan, as well as highlighting the extreme importance of the spatial relationships, Costa noted that

“there is the Cathedral in this esplanade, but it is placed in an autonomous plaza located laterally – not only for matters of protocol – once the Church is separated from the State, as for a question of scale, aiming to valorising the monument, and yet, principally, for a reason of architectural order: the perspective of the totality of the esplanade must continue up until the platform in which the two urban axes cross each other” (Costa 1957: 38).

Thus, the urban structure was organised to make possible walking from the intersection of the cross (discussed above) along the monumental axes. This enabled seeing the spectacular progression of the main institutions ruling the country and, at the very end the palaces of the Congress dominated the entire urban landscape (fig. 13), stressing through their height the importance of democracy in the Brazilian territory.

The National Congress is likely one of the most famous architectural shape in Brasília and in the whole of Brazil, a building that particularly expressed the geopolitical ambitions that characterised the construction of a new capital city. As well as the other two constructions in Three Powers Plaza, it was designed by Oscar Niemeyer<sup>106</sup>. The Congress is made of a complex of buildings, the most important of which are the two twin towers, and the two semi-spherical constructions, the chamber of deputies and the senate, located next to the buildings. All the buildings are erected on an elevate platform working as a sort of stage for Brasília’s most important constructions. The Congress represented a typical expression of the modernist conception, thanks to its extremely regular forms as well as its monumental aspect. When presenting the project in 1957, Niemeyer explained clearly the reasons that stayed beyond that original organisation of space.

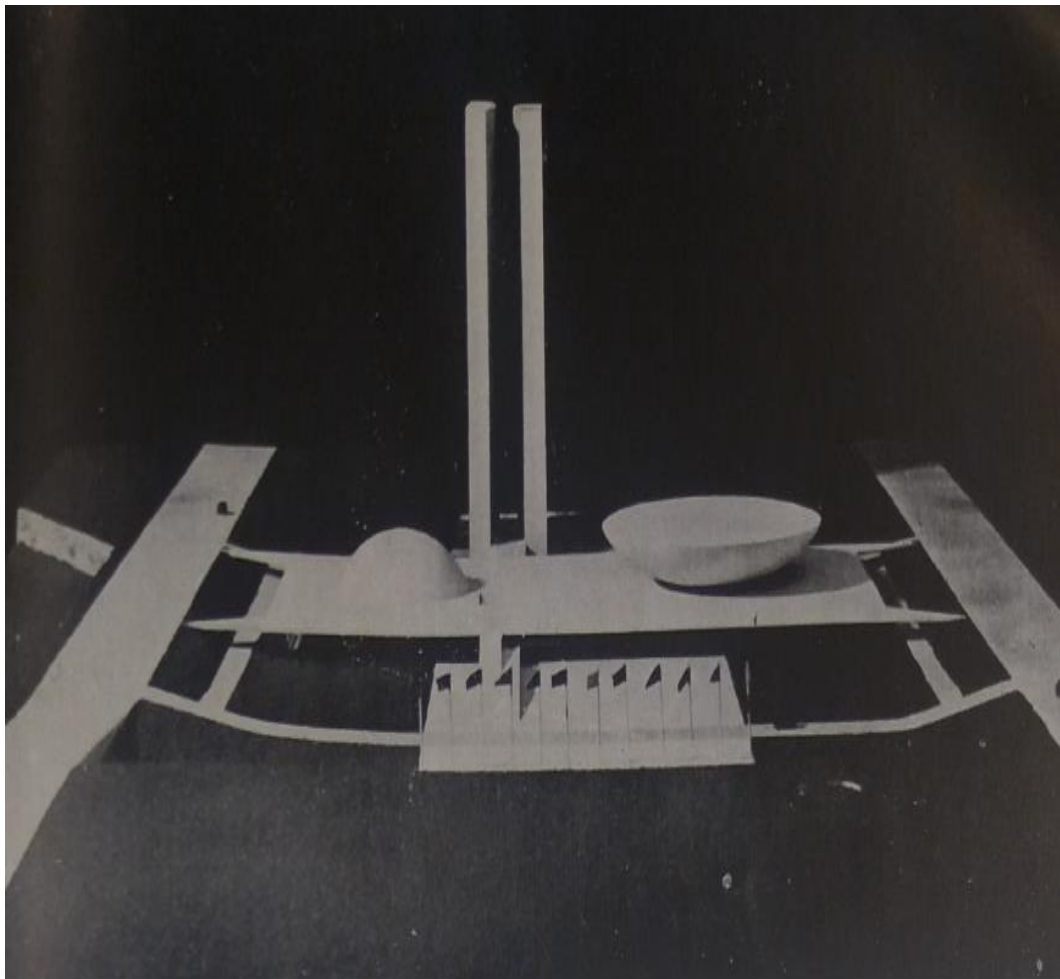
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<sup>106</sup> A reading about Niemeyer’s Brazilian modernism is provided by Underwood (1994).

“The project comprehends the all services in relation to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The objective of reuniting the two houses of the Congress in a sole building aims to offer a more rational and economical solution to the problem, without damage their indispensable independence [...]. On the other hand, being conceived in a unique block, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate will constitute a monumental assemblage able to dominate, as desired, the other city’s constructions” (Niemeyer 1957: 9).

The Congress, thus, embodying the idea of democracy expressed through

*Figure 10 - The National Congress. Source: Brasília, n.7, July 1957: 9*





(democratic) power and prestige of Brasília, “*a Nova Capital de uma Grande Nação*” (the New Capital of a great nation) (Niemeyer 1961: 33). Moreover, the architect explained the way he created the shapes of the congress by explaining the method which characterised his works in the new capital city; he highlighted that

“in the palaces of Brasília, the idea of finished work was always with me while the plans were being carried out, so that as I elaborated them, I also went over them mentally, seeking to design forms in function of this variable point of view of the future visitor. Hence certain solutions were adopted for the structures, structures that have been modified plastically in function of different points of view [...]. In developing the design of Alvorada Palace and the Palace of National Congress, I applied the same criterion, envisioning the domes of the plenary chambers of the latter with the same features of scale and volume that they have today (Niemeyer 1959: 8-11).

The idea of using monumental architecture for national and nationalist goals was not a Brasília’s specificity. However, what makes important the prominence of the Congress is the strong correlation between democracy and development that marked Kubitschek government<sup>107</sup>. The perception of been underdeveloped was due not only to the size of the national economy and the strong inequality within it, but also to the idea that the weakness of political institutions would have strengthened that subaltern condition. In line with the developmentalist notions propagated from the United States in the postwar period, Kubitschek was keen to conceive economy and democracy as tied by a substantial nexus thereby one would reinforce the other, he claimed that “the economic situation of Latin America has to improve, if democracy wants to prevail” (quoted in Cardoso

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<sup>107</sup> For example, some reflections about democracy are in Kubitschek 1962 (pp.19-21).

1977: 109). Brazil's geopolitical condition was articulated into the geography of the Cold War.

Like most of the social-democratic governments, and despite being associated to the Third-World bloc<sup>108</sup>, Kubitschek's idea of Brazil as part of the Occidental/Euro-American 'hemisphere'. The president believed in the equation according to which the Western countries were synonym of development and the socialist/communist ones of poverty, clarifying that

"it is necessary that we convince ourselves of the idea that the struggle against underdevelopment in Latin America is important in order to promote the security of the continent and, within these conditions, it must be inserted into a strategic program of Occidental defence" (quoted in Cardoso 1977: 113).

Differently from the case of Vasconcelos explored in the previous chapter, Kubitschek presidency viewed Brazil within a Pan-American perspective<sup>109</sup>. This was a quite unusual fact, as normally the leftist governments were quite anxious about the imperialist role that United States had played over Latin America since mid-nineteenth century and that was further strengthened in the aftermath of 1959 Cuban Revolution<sup>110</sup>. Kubitschek's political project for Latin America was strictly related to that of development, he noted that, in relation to a regional perspective, "the struggle for development has to begin from our country" adding that Brasília "is a landmark, is the flag of the struggle against

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<sup>108</sup> The term 'Third World' was originally coined by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952 to indicate the countries non-aligned with either the Euro-American capitalist bloc ('First World') or the socialist/communist bloc ('Second World').

<sup>109</sup> This element is accurately explored by Cardoso (1977: 112-118). However, this does not mean that the relationships between Brazil and the United States during Kubitschek presidency were smooth and without marked contrasts (for example, see Hilton 1981).

<sup>110</sup> Moreover, Kubitschek strongly believed that Latin America was an extremely important area in geopolitical terms; he remarked: "I am every day more convinced that the final and decisive fight for the domain of the world will occur in this Continent" (Kubitschek 1962: 113).

underdevelopment. It is more than this: it is the conquest of what has been ours only on the map" (Kubitschek 1958a: 4)

It is under this lens of democracy and development that the Palace of National Congress assumed a specific and strategical value. This project (and message) worked on multiple scales, involving the national as much as the regional and international levels. In order to show the importance of the core of Brazilian democracy, Niemeyer explained that the design was conceived building upon the

"convenience of architecture and urbanism, the volumes, the visual profundity and perspectives and, especially, to the intention to give a character of strong monumentality to the Palace, through the simplification of its elements and the adoption of forms that were pure and geometric" (Niemeyer 1961: 50).

Furthermore, it is again worth stressing the idea of complete coherence between the pilot plan and the architectural forms that was at the basis of the design of the city as well as, very importantly, of the core of its most symbolic area. In this regard, Niemeyer underlined:

"we were very satisfied when we saw Lucio Costa's Pilot Plan as it adapted very well to the terrain [...], and its free spaces and volumes were beautiful and balanced. We felt that the desired atmosphere was already there, an atmosphere of respectable monumentality, as a capital city requires, with the Ministers succeeding in a disciplined way and with Three Powers Plaza that was rich of forms and, at the same time, sober and monumental" (Niemeyer 1961: 55-56)<sup>111</sup>.

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<sup>111</sup> He emphatically added: "We thought of all of this as if the city was already built, and imagined it at night, with Three Powers Plaza illumined, an iron and dramatic illumination

Yet, the collaboration with the protagonists of the project was not free of disagreements. For instance, it is worth remembering how Niemeyer, despite being a close friend and chief collaborator of Kubitschek in projecting Brasília, did not share his Pan-American and anti-communist view. On the contrary, as a convinced communist, he had different ideas about the character of the United States and, within the publication of his memories regarding the construction of Brasília he said:

“it was with sadness that I came to know lamentable facts such as Brazilian delegation’s behaviour at UN, subservient to the United States’ interests, forgetting the unity that the Latin American peoples claimed in order to defend their own interests which, in that period, the greatness of the Cuban Revolution raised very convincingly” (Niemeyer 1961:34)<sup>112</sup>.

The themes of modernisation and development were strongly entrenched in the national discourse, as it is evident by looking at the language used by Kubitschek who, during his speeches, referred continuously to the fact of being underdeveloped and thought of all the possibilities of leaving that unconformable state. Poverty was one of the recurring elements, which was thought as an irrefutable evidence of that state of backwardness in relation to the Western/European countries. That was the main reason why, despite of his leftist ideas, he firmly claimed to belonging to the ‘Occident’ and not to the communist East, seen as irremediable poor, alien to the idea of development and therefore not

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that stand out white, as if it as fluctuating in the Panalto’s [the elevate platform, see description above] immense obscurity” (Niemeyer 1961: 56).

<sup>112</sup> However, in the same pages, probably in order not to show or perhaps create any conflicts with Kubitschek, Niemeyer noted that “rarely I talked to Juscelino Kubitschek about politics, afraid of importuning him with my opinions as a leftist man, feeling that I did not find in this topic the receptiveness that he always offered me” (Niemeyer 1961:33-34) and that, despite some disappointments (such as the example at ONU mentioned above), he had “the certainty that Juscelino Kubitschek owned the indispensable human qualities to assume the brave and realist position that Latin America claims” (Niemeyer 1961: 34-35).

desirable (Cardoso 1977: 77-136). However, as Arturo Escobar convincingly argued, the very concept of development is part of a discursive practice that reorganised the world in the postwar period according to a Euro-American point of view that broke only formally with the colonial experience. More precisely, it was during the interwar period that “the ground was prepared for the institution of development as a strategy to remake the colonial world and restructure the relations between colonies and metropolises” (Escobar 1995: 26) and, during the Cold War, “reality had been colonized by the development discourse” (Escobar 1995: 5).

As mentioned earlier, the postwar geography was characterised by the invention of the ‘Third World’: a linear logic by which the non-Western countries should have implemented specific economic and political policies in order to ‘reach’ the Euro-American level (see chapter 1). In other words, the very notion of Third World is

“the process by which, in the history of the modern West, non-European areas have been systematically organized into, and transformed according to, European constructs. Representations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America as Third World and underdeveloped are the heirs of an illustrious genealogy of Western conceptions about those parts of the world” (Escobar 1995: 7).

In many cases, as well as in Brazil, this notion crisscrossed problematically the leftist sides of political thought, creating plans that despite their alleged radicalism were strongly framed within this Eurocentric and somehow neo-colonialist way of thinking. The example of Kubitschek and Niemeyer is just one of the contradictory situations within which leftist governments and intellectuals acted during that period. For instance, one of Kubitschek’s slogan was “sovereignty for development” (see Kubitschek 1961: 113-165), in which development meant a number of economic, social and political

achievements (Kubitschek 1961: 113). These achievements were therefore the product of “a nationalist effort, a crusade whose objectives, apparently multiple, were in fact melded into the only big objective, namely Development” (Kubitschek 1961: 114). Using a similar tone, the deputy José Joffily highlighted a few years earlier that “the relocation of the Capital is [...] a big step towards the formation of the Developmentalist State [*Estado Desenvolvimentista*]”, a state that will be able to overcome the country’s main problems associated to poverty, such as “shortage of transport and energy undernourishment, illiteracy, endemic diseases, exploitation by foreign capital”; he concisely concluded: “I am for the city relocation [*eu sou mudancista*] because I am nationalist” (Joffily 1958:1).

On the one hand, it can be argued that ‘the left’ was inherently not able to realise a rupture with the postcolonial framework. Yet, on the other, some movements had been able to shake the postcolonial social order, not least by including in their project and action the indigenous people. In addition to many experiences of different size and success, just to give the most prominent examples, it is necessary to mention at least the Mexican Revolution (see chapter 5) and, thinking of the period analysed in this chapter, the Cuban Revolution (1959); the latter experience constituted a watershed in Latin American postwar politics, due also to its critical importance within the international geography of the Cold War.

Thus, looking from this perspective, the Three Powers Plaza, and the centrality given to the Congress, assumes a particular relevance which was deeply inserted in the geopolitical structure articulated by the Cold War. The intention to urbanise democracy and development precisely followed the Euro-American conception formulated within the discourse of the Third World. However, the ‘dream’ of an inclusive and ‘advanced’ democracy expressed in the shapes of Brasília ended up abruptly in 1964, only three

years after the inauguration of the new capital city<sup>113</sup>, when a military coup gained the core of Brazil's power and began a twenty-year period of dictatorship that demolished Brasília's emancipatory project. In the same year, the Brazilian geographer Milton Santos said that Brasília was still an "incomplete organism", however, despite the problems the city was facing, it undoubtedly provided "an image of future" (Santos 1964: 378, 380).

## *Conclusion*

There should be little doubt about the substantial failure of Brasília's project. The city largely missed all its main goals, and particularly those regarding social equality and integration. The attempt to prevent the segregation within city created the paradoxical effect of clusters of impoverished urban settlements *outside* the Brazilian capital and known as satellite cities. Thus, instead of generating the absence of spatial segregation, on the contrary the project of Brasília produced the most segregated Brazilian city. The first satellite city was Núcleo Bandeirante, only in 1956, it was planned in fact by the state as a residential place for the workers who were building and was indicated as a temporary location during the works. However, people massively flowed to the satellite city and, as Kubitschek noted years later recalling the phenomenon, he said that they soon realised that "the [growth of the] *improvised city*<sup>114</sup> would not have stopped"

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<sup>113</sup> In the meantime, the city experienced a steady growth: Brasília had 141.742 inhabitants at the moment of its inauguration (1961) and counted 546.015 in 1970 (Sinopse Preliminar Do Censo Demográfico 1970 [1971]: 15). In addition, it is interesting to note that 96% of Distrito Federal's inhabitants (the area including Pilot Plan, satellite cities and surrounding rural zones) lived in "urban agglomerates", therefore stressing the achievement of generating population that was highly urbanised (Sinopse Preliminar Do Censo Demográfico 1970 [1971]: 12).

<sup>114</sup> It is interesting to note the terminology used for the satellite city. The president referred to Núcleo Bandeirante as something *improvised*, stressing thus the ephemeral and almost spontaneous intention that accompanied its conception. Moreover, that urban arrangement was usually named *Ciudad Libre* [Free City] to highlight one the one side that

(Kubitschek 2000 [1975]: 218, emphasis added)<sup>115</sup>. The arrival of migrants from all around Brazil who were looking for new opportunities rapidly generated satellite cities, as part of a process often characterised by the illegal occupation of land. Hence, Taguatinga appeared in 1958, Sobradinho and Gama in 1960 (located respectively 25 km to the Northeast and 38 km to the South of Brasília - that is, of the Pilot Plan). As a result, the project of Brasília resulted in something different and often even opposite to the ambitions of the planners.

This chapter discussed how the project of Brasília had an important relevance in relation to the three key dimensions analysed in this thesis. First, the specific ideas with respect to the national territory - for instance, having finally a capital city in the geographical centre of the country - signified understanding Brasília as a tool *modernise* the structure of the national population (also by means of new centralising the infrastructures). The modernisation of the nation was thought as impossible to achieve without the modernisation of the territory, which meant a change in the spatial relationships.

Second, the interior of the country was seen as such a sign of past, especially with regard to the arid interior [*sertão*], following a conception of national space as something that had to be homogeneous and under the command of the modernising force of the urban. In this sense, the constant reference to the actual colonisation of the territory was somehow a rearticulation of the colonial discourse and practices, which conceived precolonial lands as something essentially wild and savage that waiting for

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the area was free from taxation (to facilitate the workers' settlement) and on the other side the difference from the Pilot Plot in which everything was very carefully measured and planned.

<sup>115</sup> This is part of the general preoccupations that accompanied the city since its very beginning. For example, the architect and planner William Holford noted that "the main problems are likely to be social, explicitly referring to satellite cities and the potential spread of slums (Holford 1962: 17).



the civilising forces: cities, and especially the radical modernism that defined the design of the new capital city, were the leading tool for this transformation.

Third, the project materialised geopolitical desires that acted within an international scene that was defined by the Cold War. The central importance of democracy and development - that was expressed by iconic architectural shapes such as Three Power Plaza and the Palace of National Congress - was articulated within a scene that, at least from the Kubitschek's viewpoint, saw the United States as a necessary geopolitical ally. On the other hand, the constant obsession for the urban was largely part of what Escobar called the "magic formula" of development (Escobar 1995: vii), in which democracy and urbanisation were two fundamental ingredients for its realisation.

However, as well as many Latin American cities, Brasília became soon a dystopic city in which the democratic project was clearly weak. A further symbolical slap to the project arrived after 1964 military coup when Kubitschek lost his political rights and went to a voluntary exile until 1967; exile that attended Niemeyer too, who did not go back to Brazil until 1970 (and he worked in very difficult conditions until the end of the dictatorship in 1984). The military coup represented the end of Kubitschek's leftist plan which had the construction of a new capital city at its core. As Escobar noted, the magic formula which was capable of taking to "the kingdom of abundance promised by theorists and politicians in the 1950s [...] produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression" (Escobar 1995: 4). In this case, 1964 military coup undoubtedly represented the watershed that abruptly ended of the path of renovation that marked Kubitschek presidency.

## Conclusions

### *The Urban as an Archive*

Capital cities were much more than mere spaces of representation. They consisted in distinguished places in which power relations were produced and materialised. By looking at some of Latin America's most iconic episodes of urban renovation the research has hopefully shed light on the main features and contradictions defining each country's national project. The problem of national identity was a matter of crucial importance for the ruling elites as, on the one hand, they aimed to reinforce their dominant position within postcolonial society and, on the other, had to naturalise such an asymmetrical structure. The nation embodied a strategic tool capable of addressing both of these questions. Being shaped in terms of architectural styles, racial hierarchies, or distribution of population, discourses about national identity shaped the very understanding of each country's postcolonial period.

Simultaneously, these transformations reflected a constant preoccupation with the urban as a space that, in one way or another, was considered fundamental for the modernisation of the country. Being part of a genealogy of the Latin American urban question that exploded in the 1970s, the cases analysed represented important anticipations of the increasing centrality of the urban, which would have eventually brought about an overall process of the "urbanisation of Latin American society" (Quijano 1975). However, during the decades here under study the urban represented an *enigma*; namely, within a context in which, regardless of the positivism that often surrounded the discourse about urbanisation, urban

transformations were inevitably conceived and realised through contradictory relationships with the rural. Cities were spaces of control, organisation and prestige whose 'modernisation' was considered of fundamental importance for any process of solidification of the nation state. Nonetheless, at the same time, the rural continued to be a crucial presence in Latin America societies. Despite the dramatic growth of the urban population as well as the huge flows of migrants leaving the countryside and moving towards large urban centres, the rural remained a crucial space for Latin America's national economies that still defined by the importance of the primary sector.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the rapid increase in urbanisation did not correspond to a likewise increase in industrialisation (Almandoz 2006, 2015). This signified also the general permanence of a strong rural identity that was the product of these economic and social elements that had as a main protagonist the peasantry and the indigenous populations (the Mexican revolution is a prominent event that placed this 'rural question' in a prominent place, visible even at international level). In this sense, considering the connections, and political struggles, the urban question was inevitably a rural question in Latin America. And these tensions and contradictions represented what this research defined as the urban enigma, that is, an *early period* of the urban question in which the transformation of Latin American cities - especially capital cities - inevitably involved dealing with these spatial questions in social, economic and, not least, symbolical terms. In this regard, the urban represented a sort of inevitable enigma that the ruling elites needed to solve in order to achieve the desired modernisation; as the three empirical chapters have showed, the enigma was differently answered depending on the country's specific socio-political configuration.

In light of these points, it is important to note that I considered the urban enigma as the *genealogy* of what from the 1970s - when the explosive growth of Latin American cities had largely transformed Latin American society (Quijano 1975) - began to be considered as a part of the global urban question (Castells 1977). The episodes analysed here have showed a general concern about the very 'nature' of the Latin American space and, in spite of the significant differences between the cases, the urban was used as a formidable tool in order to radically transform the postcolonial country. Thanks to the centralisation of power that normally accompanied the solidification of the post-independence state, capital cities represented crucial places that encapsulated, metonymically, the core of national identity. As a result, the idea of *time* was therefore at the centre of the urban enigma; these projects of transformation aimed to capture temporal constructions that were in line with the specificities of each national project.

The element of time was specifically configured in that of *temporality*, element that was constantly at stake in the three projects of urban renovation. This incessant temporal preoccupation generated a multiplicity of *third spaces* (Bhabha 1994) whose materialisation can be seen in the shapes of the urban environment. The solidification of the nation state meant a continuous necessity to negotiate the historical understanding of each country on the basis of the diachronic subdivision of the global space that began with European colonialism in the Americas (Mignolo 1995, 2005). Crucially, these internal splits within contemporaneity took place at the level of "enunciation", which gave form to the "transitional and disjunctive temporalities of modernity" (Bhabha 1994: 251). The urban environment, as a spatial and material expression of enunciation, reflected a particular understanding of, and response to, such temporal asymmetries.

The national question was indissolubly tied to this element and in Latin America, as well as in most post-independence countries, the question

was strongly related to colonial history. The countries felt a strong duty to demonstrate the completion of the itinerary leading to national modernisation. The three projects analysed can be viewed as a sense of *reaction* against the fact of being located in such a subordinate position in the international order. The countries definitely seemed to act within an environment that was defined by what Escobar described as “the infantilization of the Third World” (1995: 3) and struggled to break free from this alleged stage of historical childhood and demonstrate the achievement of *maturity*.

This perception of distance from contemporary time was resolved, for instance, in a re-articulation of each country’s past. As stressed by Bhabha, “the recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past, it introduces the other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition” (Bhabha 1994: 2). Thus, within a postcolonial project that relied particularly on the *imagination* of the ruling elites (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Anderson 2006 [1983]), countries used the transformation of capital cities in order to show each nation’s history anew. Of course, many contradictions marked these accounts that were also, and very importantly, indicative of the country’s internal configuration of power relations. It was a constant re-articulation of the conflict between History 1 (s) and History 2(s) in which, at a multiple level, postcolonial countries desired to make the decisive step towards the leading side of History (1). By doing so, the cases offered multiple versions of a *temporal conflict* that was substantially played out within the Western/European mindset, that is, according to a linear, progressive, and unidirectional understanding of modernisation and development.

As a leading force, the question of time not only shaped the urban environment in terms of expert knowledge on architecture and urban

planning, but it also articulated specific imagines of the *national space* in relation to urban/rural relationships, ideas of national population and geopolitical desires. As outlined in the introductory part of this research, these crucial questions can be explored and understood only by considering their deep interconnections. Overall, the combinations and discrepancies that have marked the making of these processes are what this research consider as the specific configurations of postcolonialism in Latin America. The urban, as an *archive*, is a place in which it is possible to explore these themes that were at the core of the transformations that occurred from the end of the colonial period. The question of temporality was explicitly tied to that of geography in the three projects of urban transformation studied here.

### ***Urban/Rural Dynamics***

The urban enigma was enacted on multiple scales and one of the most important ones concerned the actual understanding of the urban within the national space. If cities had traditionally exerted a central role across the centuries, the radical transformations that were occurring from the end of the nineteenth century certainly increased and changed the questions about the role of urban space within a 'modern' nation. As a result, the rural/urban relationship was something immediately at stake when it came to projects of modernisation.

It is possible to individuate three diverse modes of understanding this relation. First, there is the case of Buenos Aires, in which the relation changed depending on the place in which the discourse was enacted. Internally, urban life was used as a proof to demonstrate the right to organise national hierarchies around the capital city – to the detriment of

the indigenous population; externally, the rural was used as a predominant image in order to place the country in an important position within the global market of raw materials. Second, in a similar way, the case of Brasília showed the predominance of the urban discourse over the rural space. Here, the new capital city was a tool explicitly used for the colonisation of the interior that, as discussed above, was conceptualised as an *empty space*. As with developmentalist approaches, the city was viewed as an indicator of the level of civilisation of the whole country. There was no direct mention of the rural question in the project of Brasília, however, it was conceived as a strategic way to defy Brazil's socio-spatial unbalances. The idea of emptiness in relation to the interior of the country was one of the main elements that justified the construction of the new capital city<sup>116</sup>. This was coupled with a constant discourse about the colonisation of the interior of the country, a further rhetorical expression that alluded to the filling of some historical vacuity. In this case the production of certain ideas of the past, even if framed as an absence, strongly contributed to the construction of the postcolonial space. Third, the relationship between urban and rural was configured in a significantly different way in the case of Mexico City. The rural question was a constant reference for the post-revolutionary period. The Palace of Public Education showed that the rural – which meant the peasantry and indigenous population together – had been brought to the centre of the capital and used as a dominant element in the representation of Mexico.

Thinking of the built environment, it is possible to borrow Prakash's words describing architecture in postcolonial India as an attempt to recover

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<sup>116</sup> This was very interestingly linked with the idea of *absence* of past that was precisely defied through a project that was meant to proceed without hesitation towards the future. This remarkable rupture with the past – whether pre-colonial or colonial, indigenous or Portuguese – indicated a sort of negative conception of history: history became something that was seen more as a potential source of hindrance than as a solid basis for national development.

“what we never had” (Prakash 1997). Very interestingly, in the Brazilian case this was carried out in a particularly original way, that is, through the shapes of a modernist future. However, the same observation can be made as in the other cases, in which the ‘lack’ of a shared historical narration generated multiple attempts to fill that emptiness, both in material and cultural terms.

Overall, these different configurations of the relationship between urban and rural represented important manifestations of Latin America’s urban enigma. The rural question was something that, explicitly or not, maintained a central role in the articulation of the postcolonial nation; after all, “colonial constellations of power-knowledge were inscribed in space” (Gregory 1994: 174), and the rural, in an antinomic way against the urban, had been distinguishing the imagination of Latin American space up until then. The three cases allow a multifaced illustration – made up of connections, continuities and discrepancies – of what partook in the imagination of Latin American space. In genealogical terms, these three episodes show the increasing preoccupation with a coherent representation of national space along with the postcolonial desire to achieve the status of modernisation.

### *The Shaping of National Population*

Alongside the rural question, discourses and practices concerning the urban directly involved specific understandings of the national population. Being one of the main ‘novelties’ in the making of the modern state, population resulted in becoming a main preoccupation with regard to the national projects under analysis. This corresponds with Foucault’s description of how the modern state is conceived, that is, as a condition in which “the



primary relationship is essentially that of sovereignty to the territory, and this serves as the schema, the grid, for arriving at an understanding of what a capital city should be and how it can and should function" (Foucault 2007: 29). In this sense, population is thought of as "a multiplicity of individuals who are and fundamentally and essentially only exist biologically bound to the materiality within which they live" (Foucault 2007: 37).

Racial distinction is one of the crucial tools that has characterised modern colonialism globally (see, for example, Loomba 2007: 104-183). Its reconfiguration during the post-independence period stressed a crucial aspect of continuity with colonial discourses and practices. In other words, despite the significant differences of each case, it concerned a reproduction of the "epistemic violence" that strongly identified colonialism (Spivak 1999: 266). In so doing, post-independence national projects adopted this tendency to *erase* internal differences in order to homogenise the national space. If racial components constitutively contributed to the *creation* of Latin America on a global scale (Mignolo 1995), similar colonial strategies were enacted with the objective of defining a compact image of what was thought of as the national population.

With regard to Argentina, this fact is particularly evident when looking at the stigmatisation of the indigenous population that was deemed as absolutely incapable of adapting to modern life. The families exhibited in the pavilion during the 1898 exhibition were constantly infantilised by the accounts of the national press. Their habits and culture were described as shockingly primitive; in this case, the 'backward' condition was deemed as *irremediable* and this meant exclusion from national process. Such a national project ended up generating the very physical extermination of southern indigenous peoples until the point of their complete disappearance, such as happened to the Ona people. On the other hand, this

corresponded to the promotion of a massive European migration that, vice versa, was seen as suitable for the elite's project of national modernisation.

In Mexico, an attempt was made to resolve the question of infantilization, like many others, through Vasconcelos' racial conceptions. Such inferiority was understood in the sense of there being a population somehow unable to deal with the modern condition, and was overthrown by a re-articulation of world history and its 'races' that aimed to demonstrate the high values of the Mexican population (as well as the Latin 'race' as a whole). More specifically, the renovation of the Palace of Public Education expressed the desire of appropriation of both pre-colonial and colonial history through the selection of a neo-colonial architectural style and Diego Rivera's solemn representations of the indigenous past. This post-revolutionary syncretism, which clearly reflected the idea of national population, was the result of the political situation that defined Mexico in the aftermath of the revolution; the importance of the peasantry's and indigenous population's revolutionary struggle created a situation in which they could no longer be excluded from the national process. Vasconcelos' original narrative aimed to recover from colonial wounds and, at the same time, to avoid anti-Spanish or anti-European sentiments; this implied a substantially classless discourse that, on the one hand, prominently included the protagonists of the revolution and, on the other, reassured the elites that an actual revolutionary change in the social order would not happen.

In Brazil, considering the project of a new capital city, the discourse about population had the main preoccupation of reflecting upon its *distribution* over the national space. In this sense, modernity was acted not through a racial discourse but according to a specific geographical understanding of population that was thought as a crucial element for a modern state. As discussed in the previous section, the discourse about the

interior, its emptiness, and the absence of past was actually related to the exclusion of the precolonial past, its history and peoples. Kubitschek's frequent mention to 'colonisation' when speaking of the interior highlighted the elites' understanding of modernisation as an action that joined developmental and colonial actions that were framed, in this specific case, within aspirations for social equality.

Hence, the three cases share a common will to react to the idea of incompetence and immaturity of Latin American countries by means of discursive and practical counter-strategies that attempted to challenge such a state. If these projects of urban transformation aimed to rearticulate each country's national geography, especially according to rural/urban dynamics and theories about the national population, they often carried out hierarchical processes that were very similar to those of *internal colonialism* (Casanova 1965; Stone 1979; Gutiérrez 2004). Except the case of post-revolutionary Mexico - where the revolution generated more inclusive (although still controversial) discourses at a national level - these episodes examined showed how internal colonialism was performed in multiple and interconnected ways that were the result of the idea, and the associated practice, of modernising the national space.

### ***Geopolitical Imaginations***

One of the pivotal challenges of postcolonial nation states was to find a prominent collocation within the world map; it was a matter of getting rid of the peripheral condition resulting from their colonial condition. At the same time, capital cities, as places of concentration of elites' interests that signified the direction of the countries' political, economic and cultural policies, aimed to naturalise their strong hegemony over the national state.

Such a “cartographic anxiety” (Gregory 1994: 70-205) highlighted how postcolonialism inherently involved spatial dynamics working within geographies that were the legacy of the colonial imagination. Depending on the had specific context, this anxiety generated different strategies that aimed to place each country in a stable and prestigious position on the global map. Argentina adopted the radical decision to fully detach itself from the Latin American space. This was carried out through the exclusion of the indigenous populations in the national project, therefore producing an idea of identity that was strongly linked with Europe and specifically within France. As the history of the Pavilion showed, the choice of a French style was clearly in line with a culture that was seen as being in close relationship with the European past and present. This distance from the Latin American context was also visibly manifested by Argentina’s request to organise a whole pavilion itself instead of following the organisers’ initial plan of dedicating a unique space for all Latin American countries participating in the Exposition. Similarly, during the exhibition of the centenary, the national press repeatedly insisted on stressing Argentina’s *lack* of national history in the field of arts, and referred to European examples to suggest the ideal path to follow.

On the contrary, post-revolutionary Mexico articulated a geopolitical image that was entirely shaped within a Latin American perspective. Through the intellectual work of Vasconcelos, The Palace of National Education materialised the project of reconstructing the history of Mexico in order to make the country one of the most prestigious socio-political and cultural spaces in the international scene. By reinventing the world human and physical geography through the recuperation of the myth of Atlantis, as well as by theorising a consequent racial image that expressed a sort of perfect mix of world populations, Vasconcelos aimed to build a national identity - that was extended to the rest of Latin America - that could be able to successfully protect defend Mexico’s and Latin America’s independence

from the United States' imperialist desires. Although part of a postcolonial imagination that adopted racial elements in order to verify a socio-political discourse, the post-revolutionary preoccupations materialised in the Palace of National Education reflected a situation of geopolitical insecurity that was resolved through a Latin Americanist perspective.

Looking at the discourse that accompanied the construction of Brasília, the geopolitical desire concerned here an alignment with Western countries within the geography of the Cold War. The shapes of Brasília aimed to use crucial themes such as democracy and development in order to place the country on that side of the conflict. The strong discourse articulated through the Three Power Plaza and its institutional buildings had the specific goal to lead Brazil to a different path of social justice and equality and, at the same time, to distance itself from the communist side led by the Soviet Union and its allies. Moreover, looking at Kubitschek's discourses, the overall development to be achieved through the new capital city was explained in terms of taking the country to its actual *adult life*. The perception of inadequateness and the consequent need to demonstrate being at the same stage, or at least in the process of achieving it, as the Euro-American leading examples, was clearly strong in the president's mind. In a similar way to how Chakrabarty described the subaltern condition of History 2 to History 1, the design of the new capital city embodied the intention to jump into History 1 and leave the subordinate side of history.

These different geopolitical imaginations show the high necessity for the postcolonial countries to find a stability on the world map transforming their national identity. The three cases analysed in this research demonstrated that geopolitical concerns were elements of crucial importance when it came to iconic projects of renovation in capital cities. However, depending on the specificities of the socio-political context at the moment of the urban transformation - both at national and international

level - these images took shapes that were significantly different, and differently rearticulated the postcolonial anxiety of occupying a prominent and safe position within the international chessboard.

### *Towards a New Idea of Latin America*

As this research aimed to show, the idea of Latin America is something that has been strongly at stake in the period following the decolonisation and especially from the end of the nineteenth century, when the state began to exert an actual control over the whole of national space. The multiple viewpoints proposed in this work showed the significant differences and discrepancies among some important national projects. However, the research also claimed that there was a substantial connection across the cases, being all part of a postcolonial nervousness that aimed on the one hand to strengthen the ruling elites' hegemonic role and, on the other, to naturalise and solidify the existence of the young nation states at a regional and international level.

Such a postcolonial condition (in the sense of Mezzadra and Rahola [2006]) signified, among other things, particular preoccupations about national identity which was accompanied by, and part of, unstoppable desires of modernisation. These manifold national projects had contradictory meanings. While there was a general intention to articulate a coherent national perspective, at a regional level where each country imagined itself inserted in different geographies that, depending on the case, for example including or not the United States, and in some occasions even excluded the Latin American region as space of socio-historical belonging (such as in the case of Buenos Aires here analysed).

What is important to understand from these examples is that, depending on each country's socio-political configuration, the idea of Latin America was far from been stable and consistent. On the one side there was the constant will to harden the architecture of the nation state, yet, the consequences at a regional and international level were significantly different as they responded to specific material interests and socio-cultural aspirations that determined each choice. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the concept of Latin America was built upon the colonial experience and its actual significance - in social, political cultural terms - was played ambiguously by the countries born from the colonial experience. The ruling elites often rearticulated colonial hierarchies and discourses to strengthen their role within the nation state and looked at the former empires - and more generally at the Western world - as formidable examples of development and success. However, at the same time, they aimed to strongly differentiate themselves and produce exceptional images of modern nation states.

The combination of these elements weakened the idea of Latin America as a stable geo-political area and further highlight the profound instability and colonial bounds that are involved within concept of Latin America. Of course, this not to say that when Latin America countries proposed solid regional perspectives it was instead a confirmation of its coherence and meaningfulness. On the contrary, this was normally understood as a reaction to the colonial heritage that marked the overall socio-economic and cultural condition of Latin American countries; as a matter of fact, intellectual and politicians who prefigured regional alliances normally attempted to go beyond the very notion of Latin America (I only recall here José Martí's *Our America* as one of the most prominent examples). Nonetheless, the episodes analysed here highlight the profound instability of a regional understanding of the area. Latin America had yet to be done. What emerges from this analysis is the strong postcolonial anxiety that

characterised Latin American countries and that generated a permanently oscillation between a variety of identities suspended between multiple places, countries, and continents.

In this sense, it is possible to talk about “many Latin Americas” (Mendieta 2008: 287) that are inevitably at stake as they have been constantly crossed by social, political, economic and cultural transformations, acting within, across and beyond the nation states. While this research focused on the modernisation and solidification of nation states, this does not obviously mean to consider the national space as an exclusive viewpoint for future research (therefore naturalising its existence). For instance, cities have been crucial places for the construction of the nation state but, especially over the past few decades, they have also showed a high degree of autonomy by often exceeding the national scale and establishing preferential bounds with other cities and places (for example, Sassen 1991). Thus, it is important to consider this instability of the concept of Latin America within and beyond its national dimensions, constantly stressing the (post)colonial heritage embedded in the nation state and therefore avoiding the trap of any *methodological nationalism* (Chernilo 2008).

As a result, a new idea of Latin America is in question, an idea which is not necessarily terminological, or at least not in the first place: it has not been the task to find here a new term to describe the region but, instead, to uncover the radical unstableness that such a definition implies. Hence, in this sense, Latin America should be understood as a complex field of tensions, as a socio-historical articulation whose determination is far from been given and, very importantly, whose social and physical borders are uncertain and in constant reconfiguration. Paradoxically, the definition of Latin America is somehow appropriate in the sense that clearly indicates the permanence of its colonial history which has played an important role



from the organisation of the newborn nation states up until now. The concept of Latin America stresses precisely the fact that this space is at stake; a deep discussion about the new terminology will be needed only when such a postcolonial configuration will eventually come to end. For now, it is of crucial importance to keep weakening the alleged stability of the concept by highlighting the multiple constellations of conflicts that have at the same time constituted and challenged such as a longstanding postcolonial condition. In other words, this means to keep moving towards the actual decolonisation of the concept of Latin America.

### *Final Considerations*

The capital city being at the core of the postcolonial adventure, these multiple cartographies inscribed the city in a space suspended between colonial spaces and global desires, ideas of rural past and urban present, as well as ruptures and continuities within the social relations inherited from colonialism. Cities in this way can be understood like “discursive formations” (Foucault 2002: 34-44)<sup>117</sup> that contain and materialise the objectives and contradictions of the national project. Capital city and nation, as a result, are bounded by a reciprocal symbolic influence in which one is the expression of the other.

Within this context the study of the city is mainly *external* in the sense that it involves the question of how the city is related – symbolically but also following material interests – to what is external to it. Instituting a dialectical set of relations between *inside* and *outside*, capital cities articulated the various relationships starting from the multiplicity of social,

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<sup>117</sup> As Foucault noted, discursive formations do not imply coherence and regularity between statements, on the contrary, it is “discontinuity, break, threshold or limit” that define their *relation* (Foucault 2002: 33).

political, economic, and cultural interests that they had on the national and international scale. Hence, following this point of view, cities spoke about something that was not the city itself, but its outside. From this perspective, the postcolonial concerned an array of spatial relationships that allow us to explore how the ruling elites used the capital city in relation to national and global ambitions.

Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Brasília aimed to be recognised internationally using a language that would allow them to be understood well beyond their national borders. The symbolic centrality of iconic buildings ordered these cartographical preoccupations. For example, the architectural styles adopted in Buenos Aires and Brasília largely consisted in prestigious models coming from Europe in which, aiming to stress diverse elements such as tradition and future, they clearly placed themselves within the *avant-gardes* of the European world. In Mexico City this international desire was expressed not so much in terms of architecture – although the adoption of a neo-colonial style was intended precisely to maintain the link with Spanish heritage – but instead through the myth of Atlantis. Vasconcelos' historical narration of human geography consisted in an extreme action that involved the desire to justify Mexico's belonging to an important global geography as well as, perhaps more interestingly, a sort of implicit intention to *decolonise* the very production of knowledge in relation to geography.

Furthermore, looking at the three cases and how they materialised each country's socio-political configuration through urban transformation, Mexico City seems to be the only one in which a radical change was really at stake. The post-revolutionary period included social components that had traditionally been excluded since the start of the colonial era, that is, the peasantry and the indigenous population. This created an original situation in which the rural was triumphantly represented in the core of the urban

space, such as in the case of the Palace of Public Education. Among the cases explored, this was the only one in which the national identity included, on the discursive level, 'the rural' as one of its constitutive parts. Moreover, the disruptive force of the revolution created narratives that sometimes strongly challenged 'traditional' Euro-American standpoints; in this sense, Vasconcelos' theory of Cosmic Race was a sophisticated attempt to defend Mexico and Latin America from the aggressiveness of United States imperialism. The way in which Vasconcelos conceived this defence indicated an untold awareness of the importance of a sort of *epistemological reaction*; namely, the necessity to fight against the concepts that had forged Latin America as a subaltern space – permanently immature – within the global landscape. Vasconcelos' discourse on the perfect race, as well as his geographical overturn through the history of Atlantis, represented a highly original – although only partial – attempt to dismantle (or *decolonise*) Latin America's postcolonial geography.

On the other hand, Buenos Aires and Brasília had their own specificities; Buenos Aires embodied the ruling elite's project of dissociating themselves – and the country's identity – from the rest of Latin America. Internally, this strategy of differentiation was used to justify and naturalise what had become Buenos Aires' unchallenged command of over the national space. Brasília represented instead the dream of social equality within the urban fabric, as well as a more equal distribution of people, resources, and wealth across the country. Paradoxically, the project was carried out through modernism's authoritarian determinism and very quickly the socio-political situation – both in the urban and national context – ended up being diametrically opposite to the government's initial expectations. In more general terms, the three cases demonstrated the cruciality of articulating national identity through renovations in the capital city, forging the historical and social narratives used to sustain and legitimise the postcolonial political configuration. Nonetheless, the

discourses were far from being linear; has been shown, depending on the internal arrangement of power relations the narratives assumed specific and often contradictory forms; the exploration and comparison of these contradictions allowed us to reconstruct the various and multifaceted factors that contributed to the historical formation of the global space known as Latin America.

Thinking of contemporary global urban age, the urban enigma offers some reflections to analyse Latin America's urbanisation, genealogically. As part of the world periphery - that is, as a former colonial space - Latin America experienced an earlier spread of urbanisation, particularly in comparison to Africa and Asia. This different temporality places Latin America in a special place that consists in an area that anticipated the process of mega-urbanisation within what is today frequently called the Global South. Such a distinctive trait mirrors Latin America's overall differences from other colonial spaces, especially in terms of colonial legacy (as Spanish and Portuguese colonies) and earlier process decolonisation. In this sense, the urban enigma helps to explore the urban age in Latin America within a global perspective.

Taking into account a global perspective means to analyse cities and urban processes considering the asymmetries of power - and their multiple histories - that influence the production and reproduction of urban space. Within this scheme, the concept of time deeply shaped the understanding of urban transformations. Barbara Adam underlined that time "has been a most effective colonizing tool" (Adam 2004: 137) and it continues to exert a primary - and contradictory - role in the way in which contemporary world is normally understood. With this respect, the problematic relation between *past* and *future* is still at stake. On the one hand, the urban enigma highlighted a significant anxiety for 'the city of the future' and the decades after the 1960s started to disclose the dystopic results of the rapid urban

growth that defined the Latin America's twentieth century. On the other, the first two decades of twenty-first century still presents deep question in relation to marginalisation and social exclusion of large sector of the population within megacities that do not stop to grow - such as, for example, Buenos Aires, Mexico City and Sao Paulo. Hence, after several decades the urban question is still largely unresolved and it remains a priority within Latin America's political agenda.

Furthermore, in spite of the arrival of the 'urban age' in Latin America, the rural has maintained its crucial centrality within the national economies through the usual form of global exports in the primary sector. The extraction of raw materials such as, for example, across the Andean region, and the use of large monocultures such as soy in Brazil and Argentina, spread struggles and conflicts that have the rural and indigenous populations as their main protagonists. The question of land remains thus central for a critical analysis of Latin America's urbanisation, especially when we consider the multiple geographies that influence its constant transformation. In such way, the urban enigma continues to represent both a symbolic and spatial contradiction in postcolonial Latin America, that is, a space that is constantly engaged, both in theoretical and empirical terms, in the struggle towards an actual decolonisation.

At the same time, the urban enigma set the foundation for today's socio-political challenges which are trapped between the ambiguities of the past and the alternative directions for the future. To give an example, Coronil noted that the wave of leftist governments that crossed Latin America at the dawn of the twentieth century proposed "phantasmatic" ideas of future (Coronil 2011: 247). He pointed out that although these governments elaborated visions of the past on the basis of strong pre-colonial and anti-colonial imaginaries - therefore potentially disruptive within the postcolonial framework - they created "a conglomeration of

contradictory tendencies and actions leading to no clear destination” and, as a result, “a nightmarish sensation of being trapped saturates the present” (Coronil 2011: 247). The paradoxical relationship between past and future lays at the core of the postcolonial present. Cities, more than ever during the urban age, are the material and symbolical arena in which these social, political, and cultural projects are at stake.

Finally, the research could now proceed in two ways. One goes towards a refinement of this investigation, whereas the other towards its temporal continuation. The first possibility is concerned with continuing to (re)build this part of the historical account by showing the voices and acts of *resistance* that opposed the projects of transformation here discussed. In this regard, further investigation could explore the ‘small voices’ of these processes that have been overlooked here. For instance, the movements that resisted and fought these national projects, especially those in relation to the urban questions that have been outlined. Those which, within or beyond the urban space defied the modernising projects of the elites and their usual positivist understanding of the urban environment. In this sense, the archival work would be substantially different; as a completion of what has been attempted in this research, it would consist in finding documents produced by small political associations such as, for instance, parties and unions, as well as similar voices that disagreed with the mainstream national narratives.

The second option consists in stepping into the following historical phase, namely that of neoliberalism. If this research underscored the state as the main actor in the shaping of the urban environment, the period starting from the 1970s was instead progressively characterised by the arrival of the ‘market’ as a competitive figure. This does not mean to say that the state was marginalised, but the increasing autonomy of the market would reorient the socio-political processes and, accordingly, discourses,

policies, and practices. Following this view, future research would continue exploring Latin America's urban transformations starting from when this research ended. If from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s the urban represented an enigmatic challenge, during the following decades it would become an inevitable and thorny question due to the dramatic spread of urban areas giving the urban an unquestionable centrality. In any case, future research would follow the direction of this study, that is, a critical investigation of the elements that participated in forging the contradictory idea of Latin America. The combination of genealogical work and relational comparison would enable the continued exploration of the contiguities and discrepancies that collaborated in shaping Latin America's postcolonial geographies.

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